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A

WEEK IN KILLARNEY

BY

"THE DUCHESS"

A WEEK IN KILLARNEY

CHAPTER I.

We have barely crossed the threshold of the Victoria Hotel when we meet her. She comes toward us across the hall with the prettiest air of surprise imaginable and the daintiest smile.

"Why, it is you, Muriel!" says my wife, going up to her and embracing her warmly. "What a comfort to meet a friend the very first thing!"

"For me it will be the very last thing," returns Miss Kingsley. "Just to think of it! We have been here only two days, and now auntie has had a telegram recalling her to England. This very evening we must go, and we have seen nothing—nothing! Isn't it cruel? Of course I must go with her. I dropped a little tiny hint about staying here and finishing my visit without her, but"—here she pauses, laughs, and throws up her hands and eyes with a quaint assumption of the acutest horror—"she was all that way," she says, and laughs again.

There is something infectious in her laughter; we both join in it, though, if we were subjected to a cross-examination, we could not perhaps say why. Surely, as we look at her, we know in our souls her aunt is right.

"This lovely Killarney," she goes on, in her slow, sweet fashion, "I have seen only two or three bits of it, but it seems all like a tender dream. And now it will be more a dream than ever, as we must leave to-night. And now, too, when you and——" a swift glance at me, and a swifter smile, "have just come."

At this piteous speech, Carrie, who is governed by an impulsive genius, turns to me.

"Why couldn't she stay with us, George?" she says,

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with radiant thoughtlessness, as if the care of a handsome young woman, and an Irish one to boot, involved no responsibility whatsoever. "It seems such a shame that she should go without seeing anything, and it would be so nice for us, and——"

"It certainly would be very nice for us," I remark, but with caution. "Perhaps, however, Miss Kingsley——"

"Oh! if you only would let me stay with you!" interrupts that young lady, clasping her hands. "I mean," with a graceful droop into melancholy again, "if you are sure I should not be—in the way, I mean."

"In the way? Nonsense! Why, we are quite old married people now, and tired to death of each other. Aren't we, George?" says Carrie, with the clearest laugh.

We are not old married people, and I could have said so, but, as I am plainly expected to join in this laugh, I do so with as good a grace as possible.

"Then it is settled?" says Carrie.

"Oh, yes! settled," says Miss Kingsley, beaming upon me.

It is. That very night, at dinner, she sits, auntless, beside Carrie, at the *table d'hôte*, and makes herself equally agreeable, in her gentle way to me, to Carrie, and to two young men who have got as close to her as circumstances will permit. One, indeed, has secured (no doubt by bribery) the seat on her right hand—a victory that, I can see, awakes in the breast of the other, wild but smothered sentiments of revenge and hatred. She seems to be the centre of attraction to all around, and raises many unholy expressions on the lips of her maiden sisters, whose charms fade before hers. The very waiter (who is as like a bull-terrier as humanity will allow) is obsequious in his attentions, hangs over her with tender inquiries about hock or champagne, and appears cut to the heart when she refuses to partake of any savory dish he brings her.

She seems to me to be saying little, very little, and that of no importance at all, such as the small amount of scenery she has as yet seen, and so on. She babbles of Torc, the Lower Lake, the sunset on the previous evening—all in no very exalted style, that I can see, yet those two young men hang upon her lips as though pearls were dropping from them. She is kind to them,

too, but in a mild, absent fashion that seems to whet their admiration; and if now and then she does permit her eyes to be sweeter than her tongue, I cannot be sure it is not unconsciously she does it.

"She is the very dearest girl!" says Carrie to me, as we close our doors upon the world that night. "Quite the nicest I know. She never drags, does she? I'm so glad you thought of asking her to stay on with us here."

I thought! I asked! As I have never yet disputed a question with Carrie, I don't feel up to beginning it now, yet a mild protest I venture.

"I had a ridiculous idea that it was you asked her," I say, with a lenient smile at my own absurd mistake.

"Was it? Well, it is all the same," says she, airily, "and I'm sure it was the most fortunate thing I did ask her, poor dear child!"

"I only hope you won't live to repent it," mutter I, moodily.

"Why should I do that?" demands she, briskly. There is a—a liveliness about Carrie at times that takes one along with it.

"Oh, I don't know," I say, with hesitation. "Those young men at dinner, for example—they seem as if they could not live out of her sight. If they can't, you know, they must live in it. I wonder if there are many more of them?"

"They seemed nice young men," says Carrie, with an evasion I cannot fail to notice. "One is a Mr. Brooke—a nephew of Sir Archibald's. You remember him, in Scotland, don't you, darling, and how kind he was to us? The other is an engineer—a Mr.——I really forget the name, but he spoke of the Wyatts. And of course, George, a pretty girl must expect to be noticed. She is pretty, isn't she?"

"I have seen uglier girls, certainly," I acknowledge, with a carefulness that does me credit. As I have said, we are still a young married couple; sufficient time has not yet gone by since our wedding-day to enable us with decency to hate each other. I still think Carrie's eyes very pretty and her laugh full of music. What she still thinks about me I know not:

> "For half so boldëly can there no man
> Swearen and lien as a woman can."

The remembrance, too, of early days is still so fresh upon me, that instinctively I pause before openly expressing pleasure in the charms of any woman whose name is not Carrie Desmond. Though it must be confessed that Carrie Desmond, long ere this, has so far forgotten her duty to me as to speak with unblushing effrontery and undisguised admiration of the hair, or it may be the shirt-collar, or the languid droop of the mustache of many a passing acquaintance. Let all this be, however; never, unless she reads these lines, will she know of the mad cravings to grapple with the owners of those unutterable collars and mustaches that have at odd moments seized me.

"I dare say we shan't see much of those men," says Carrie, consolingly, after a short meditation. "No doubt they have formed plans of their own by this time."

"No doubt," reply I, with grim disbelief.

And, as usual, I am right. In the morning, it does not surprise me to find Mr. Brooke and the Wyatts' friend (who, I discover, calls himself by the distinguished name of Jones) overpowering in their attentions to me. They converse enthusiastically on the charms of the lakes and mountains, though it would be palpable to a year-old infant that their knowledge of them is derived from a tourist's guide; and they hint broadly at a desire to become acquainted with my plans for the growing day.

I am not even surprised at myself when presently I give them both an invitation to accompany us to wherever the gods and the boatmen may carry us after breakfast. I give the invitation as impulsively as Carrie might, and anything like the attention and friendly care those young men display toward me during that meal, I am bound to say I never before experienced.

It is a grand morning, bathed in sunshine. Miss Kingsley, tripping down-stairs ready for our excursion, in an irreproachable costume, runs as nearly as possible into the arms of two attendant swains.

"Isn't it a good thing I didn't go back with auntie?" she says, turning her limpid blue eyes not on them but on me, whereupon I can see that they both, in spite of their outward seeming, curse me inwardly. "Dear Mr. Desmond, what a day it is! You have brought the sunshine with you."

I begin to fear I shall be assassinated, when Carrie providentially makes her appearance.

"I haven't kept you waiting, have I?" says she to Mr. Brooke, whereupon he is compelled to remove his baleful glance from me and conjure up a sickly semblance of a smile.

"You will find the boat awaiting you below, sir," says the manager, coming forward, with a courteous rubbing of his hands, and, with a salutation to him, we all emerge into the open air, and stroll down to the step.

Whoever brought the sunshine, it is certainly with us. It lies upon the unruffled lake in a pale splendor, and touches the trees in the island to a lighter shade, and falls upon Tomies, that fairest of mountains, making its heather golden here and there.

"Some time too hot the eye of heaven shines," but not this day. It seems to suit the soft grandeur of the scene as we glide across the Lower Lake, past Lamb Island and the smaller Heron Isle, from which rise up to greet us as we pass a screaming cloud of wild birds—ducks, divers, and teal.

It is a day to dwarf all mean and angry thoughts, as I believe. I am too trustful. Soon it becomes known to me that ill-suppressed wrath and a raging jealousy have shipped with us. Mr. Jones has obtained the seat of honor next to Miss Kingsley. Mr. Brooke, therefore (though comfortably stowed away close to me), plainly considers himself out in the cold and miserably ill used. Now, as Mr. Brooke had been the one to sit beside her at dinner last night, it occurs to me that this day's arrangement is only reasonable. Evidently it does not so occur to Mr. Brooke. He wants everything! He glowers at me, and speaks in monosyllables to Carrie, who is too delighted, however, with the scenery to take any notice of his ill-humor.

"I thought you wanted to row, Jones?" he says, at length, with a ghastly attempt at friendliness (we have two boatmen with us, but before starting Mr. Jones had unfortunately said something to us about his rowing at Cambridge). "I'm sure you have given us to understand that you are a crack oarsman."

"I think a man never looks so well as when he is rowing," says Miss Kingsley, sweetly. This diplomatic speech is loaded with honey. It fills Brooke with the

ecstatic belief that she wants to be rid of Jones, and fills Jones with the joyful hope of being able to show himself off to her presently in his best colors. "But you must not stir yet, Mr. Jones," she says; "wait until one of the men shows some signs of fatigue."

"Oh, look at that!" says Carrie, suddenly. "That is Ross Castle. There it is on our left, stately, ivy-clad, grand with the memories of many centuries."

"The O'Donoghue's Castle, ma'am," says one of the boatmen, whose name we discover later to be James Matthews. "He had this castle, ma'am, whin the Kinmares was unheard of. Fegs, 'tis very handsome intirely. An' The O'Donoghue himself will come to see it agin now an' thin, though the grass is green over him for many a hundherd year. Ye wouldn't believe it now, ma'am, would ye?" with a roguish glance at her, "but every sivin years he'll come to see the ould home, an' take a ride across the lake!"

"A ride!" says Carrie, who is an unblushing hypocrite, and pretends always a belief in every legend told her, no matter how shadowy.

"Iss, ma'am. 'Twasn't much of a lake it was thin, in The O'Donoghue's time, but dhry land, and a fine hunt-in'-ground for him. I know an ould man, ma'am, that saw him an' his followers tearin' across it, hounds an' all, one night last October, whin the moon was up; an' he tould me ye could see through the ribs of ivery one o' thim, hounds an' horses an' hunthers an' all. Look! there's his pigeon-house, ma'am," pointing to a rock rising out of the lake, dented here and there and hollowed out and turned into little caves and caverns—"all by de action ob de wather, ma'am," says James, who plainly regards this last as a very ornate speech, as he repeats it on every possible occasion.

He has rowed us in rather close to the castle, so that we may admire more nearly its wonderfully preserved walls, and see the old women standing on the landing-place, with their baskets filled with pipes, and little pigs, and gypsy-pots, all made of bog-oak and arbutus wood. And then we row away again, past the gray stones in the lake that are supposed to represent O'Donoghue's horse, that wakes with his ghostly master every seven years to hunt o'er hill and dale, and past the stony point they call his library, and so toward "fair Innisfallen" Isle.

"An' there is The O'Donoghue's Prison, ma'am," says James, who will take no notice of any one but Carrie, being blind even to Miss Kingsley's charms—"there on yer right," pointing to a huge, square, massive rock that rises from the middle of the lake, crowned by little or no herbage. "He used to keep souldiers at the castle, ma'am, an' whin one o' thim offended him he'd have him sint over there. Twinty-four hours he'd leave 'em, on bread an' wather. Very little bread, ma'am, but"—with another roguish twinkle of his Irish eyes—"plinty o' wather, as ye may see."

We pass the prison, which looks anything but gloomy in the broad, glad sunshine, and presently come to the small, stony landing-place at Innisfallen. The signal for us to get on shore creates instant confusion in the minds of two of us, and a struggle for first place on land, all with a view to obtaining possession of a pretty gloved hand for the space of one miserable second. To look at Jones and Brooke, you might imagine there is but one pretty hand in all the world, and that Miss Kingsley is the proud possessor of it. I should be sorry to affirm positively that Jones jostled Brooke purposely with a view to upsetting him into the smiling lake, or that Brooke put his foot before Jones in the fond hope that it might bring him to an ignominious end; but certainly there is a suppressed scuffle somewhere, and more haste than elegance in the way they scramble at last on shore.

And after all, for naught! Miss Kingsley, as though oblivious of the four hands tremblingly extended to her, springs past them, and, tucking her arm confidentially within Carrie's, goes straight for the old ruins that stand scattered over this sacred isle.

Behind come I and the two disappointed youths. They cling to me rather, I cannot help acknowledging to myself, as a means of escape from each other than from any overweening affection for my society, though I am just now in one of the gayest of my many charming moods.

Carrie and Miss Kingsley are wandering through the ruins of the old abbey, in at one quaint archway and out at another, silent, wrapped in contemplation of its lonely beauty. Somehow we seem very far from man and the din of the madding crowd just now, lost in a

bygone century and a vain attempt to rebuild and re-people the sad, crumbling mass of gray stones about us. The trees around have grown so tall as to overshadow the decaying walls; one young oak is standing, strong and vigorous, in the very centre of a roofless cell—a touch of insolent life amidst all this pathetic death and decay. It has outgrown the surrounding walls, and somehow gives us a greater knowledge of the passage of time since first those walls became roofless than even the sorrowful ivy that clings to them, or the shattered curves and arches.

"How melancholy it is!" says Carrie, with a pensive sigh.

"One can almost fancy the gray-hooded friars stealing in and out here on moonlit nights," says Miss Kingsley, in a pretty awe-struck tone. "See! out of that wee, ivied door there, and round under that fallen arch, and then in here again—that is how they would steal along, with their cowls close drawn, telling their ghostly beads the while. It seems all so natural, standing as we do now. And there one night imagine a pale young monk—like the one in Doré's 'Daydream,'—lost in a cruel reverie, or sunk in prayer for the sins of all mankind."

"It is a beautiful religion," says Carrie, softly, alluding to Romanism. She sighs again, and puts on her most pious expression, the one she used to keep expressly for St. Matthias' when we were in town. She is (or at least fondly believes herself to be) an advanced Ritualist, and dotes openly upon lighted tapers and little boys in night-gowns.

"A picturesque religion, but a mass of the very grossest superstition," says Mr. Brooke, suddenly in a tone that seems to come from his boots, it is so deep and saturnine. Unfortunately, he is unaware of Carrie's High-Church tendencies, and is driven to this remark because all things at this moment are hateful to him. Carrie glares at him in melancholy scorn, and I begin to feel we are standing upon the brink of a fiery theological discussion, when Miss Kingsley's clear voice breaks the threatening silence.

"Oh, Mr. Brooke," she says, raising rapt, reproachful eyes to his, "if you must think such heresies, at least do not say them here! I am so sorry for you! I hope"—pitifully—"time will show you the beauty of many

things to which you are now blind ; but until then, do not speak as you did just now—not here. I cannot bear it, indeed ! " Her appealing wail dies away into silence. She places her hand once more on Carrie's arm, as if in need of support. She is evidently suffering. I am deeply impressed. The unhappy young man is crushed !

Downfall of Brooke ! ascent of Jones !

(" It is Jones," think I.)

" No, no ; certainly superstition is the wrong word, says that hero, coming confidently to the front, cheered by his rival's fall. " It is a religion full of grace and poetry, an ideal creed fit only for those whose souls are fired with the pure sense of faith." He pauses, and draws his hand in a languid fashion across his brow. I am much taken with his style, and stand in eager expectation of what is to come next. I don't understand him in the least, but I have intellect enough to know that that is one of his chiefest charms. " There is," he goes on, " a concentration of the beautiful, a refinement of the culture of olden days, an intensity—that er——"

An anguished exclamation checks him.

" Oh, please don't ! " says Miss Kingsley, with a visible shudder, and tears in her voice. " It doesn't suit this place at all ; it quite vulgarizes it. Do not destroy the relief we are enjoying in having got away for once from the æsthetic jargon and forced sentiment of the day to something that we can feel is real—like this."

Ascent of Brooke ! dismal downfall of Jones !

(" It is not Jones," think I.)

" To the boat ! " I cry, cheerily, feeling much for these two young men. But Carrie and her friend will not be satisfied until they have inspected every hole and corner of the island, and sat under the largest holly in Europe, popularly supposed to be flourishing on Innisfallen, and wandered through the combination of ash, holly, hawthorn, and ivy, all growing so closely together as to appear born of one parent, while in silence, I and the two stricken ones follow them, sitting when they sit, and rising when they rise, with a submission that might melt a block of granite. But what granite is as hard as the heart of a good woman ?

Then again out upon the lake, with the oarsmen pulling steadily, and our souls filling with the sweetness of

the scene. Again we get a view of Ross Castle, and, far behind it, a glimpse of Mangerton, reddening in the sunshine. Down its steep sides is stealing a thin silver thread of water that flows from the Devil's Punch-bowl and is now glinting and sparkling beneath Sol's bright rays.

"An' that's the Mouse Island there, forenist ye out ma'am," says James, as we go past a little oval isle, "where the white mice come from fust of all. They say 'twas the Chinese come down the Kinmare River be moonlight one night, many a long year ago, an' stole thim away from us."

Even this absurd legend is not too much for Carrie. She takes it without a grimace.

"Dear me! how strange!" she says, without so much as a blink of her hypocritical lids. "I wonder what they did with them?"

"Is that Ross Island?" I ask, to save her from going deeper into the mire.

"Yes, sir; 'tis the largest we have, an' 'tis joined to the land by a slip of a bridge. 'Tis three hundred and sixty-five acres—one for ivery day in the year, ma'am," with a smile at Carrie, and an air of determined resistance to any one who shall attempt to draw his attention from her. "Ross Castle is on it, ma'am; but the new castle is over there, as ye may see, up by the town."

We all turn to take a look at Lord Kenmare's new residence, that rises up from behind its trees, tall and many-turreted, all in the gaudy red brick of Queen Anne's time.

"'Tis for all the world like a factory wid thim piles o' chimbleys, isn't it now, ma'am?" says James, who appears to me to regard it with disfavor.

"It is rather," and Carrie laughs.

"He's in England now, isn't he?" ask I, alluding to Lord Kenmare.

"Iss, sir. He got a threathenin' letther, ma'am, wid an illegant death's-head an' bloody-bones on it, an' it give him the sack. But"—growing preternaturally grave, not to say indignant, as he notes her surprised glance—"'twas ne'er a Killarney boy that sint that, ma'am, but one o' thim divils o' Laguers, that won't let the ginthry alone. But sure he might be worse off whativer, for the queen has given him a new house over there," with an

airy jerk of his thumb, that gives us to understand England is just behind Innisfallen, or thereabouts, "an' a splindid coach an' four. An' well she might, fegs, for 'twas the world an' all he thought of her when she come to visit him, twinty-two years ago."

"It was a great honor, his queen's coming to stay with him," says Carrie, whom Ritualism alone has hitherto kept from turning Home Ruler. To do her justice, one sensation at a time is sufficient for her.

"Well, no doubt," says James, but with reserve. His manner conveys the idea, that perhaps the queen should have felt honored by an invitation from Lord Kenmare. "He was very kind to her whativer, ma'am, an' thought a powerful lot of her. He keeps the barge she sailed about on over these very lakes locked up in a house by itself iver since, in honor of her mimory. An' there's the cottage we'll show ye by an' by in Glena Bay, in which he gave her a bit to ate, by way of lunch, one day; for 'tis hungry work, ma'am, as ye'll find, this sight-seein'. Nary one is let into that cottage since, barrin' the care-taker. An' 'tis kept just as the queen left it, savin' that now an' thin they add to the grandeur of it, maybe in the hopes she might come agin. But sorra fear: 'tisn't grand enough we are for the likes of her!"

We have crossed the lake by this time, and are skirting along under the shadow of Tomies toward O'Sullivan's famous cascade. Above us on one side rises mass upon mass of tinted foliage, the deep, brilliant green of the arbutus with its drooping burden of white flowers, catching the wandering gaze before the calmer shades of the dusk reds and sombre russets. There is an ever-varying beauty about Tomies that renders it always new and each day dearer—a lifting or lowering of fleecy clouds upon its brows, a sudden rainbow athwart its breast, a play of hurrying sunbeams in its heights and hollows. Who can say where the change lies? Yet every coming morn one wonders at the strangeness of its glories.

Stepping lightly ashore, we climb the rugged path that leads to the cascade. Over and around us are the sighing trees; glistening masses of mossy rocks form a wall of nature's own upon our right; to our left rushes a singing stream. Scarce any ray of sunlight makes its way into this sylvan solitude, where ferns and a tangled

wilderness of blackberry and wild rose hold high festival, while through it all trembles a nervous music—the herald, as it were, of some far off rushing thunder. Then the sound grows louder, and then, all in a moment, we turn a corner and find ourselves face to face with the tumult of waters.

Over the great black bowlders comes the mighty torrent, pale green at first beneath the dancing spray, then faintest yellow as it touches the rocks below in playful fury, and then at last darkest amber as it crashes into the stony hollows far beneath. With a deafening roar it hisses from crag to crag in a mad haste that looks like fiercest anger, until at last it dies away, and sinks exhausted in the arms of the tremulous stream that bears it away to the lake.

"How like a cruel, ungovernable temper it seems!" says Miss Kingsley, pensively. "Oh, it should be a warning to us all!" Here I cannot forbear a glance at her. Is our charming moralist uttering merely a pretty sentiment, or is there deeper meaning in her words—a gentle hint to the belligerents who stand in dogged watchfulness of each other on her either hand? She bears my glance with the greatest fortitude.

"Yes, a warning to us to put aside all petty angers," she says, turning her eyes fully upon mine. Is there now an amused defiance in their soft depths? "I myself have a shocking temper," she says in dove-like tones. She looks at me again. This time there is distinct laughter within those purple orbs. There is a faint flicker of her eyelashes, and then they fall over the tell-tales within.

The waterfall is filling Carrie with joy. She sees, she hears, nothing but it. She loses herself in it a little, I think, because she slips her hand into mine, with a fine disregard of the chances of being considered still in love with me that ofttimes oppresses her.

"It is almost too much, George, isn't it?" she says, in what is a whisper here but would be a roar anywhere else. The noise of the descending waters drowns all other sounds. We gaze at it in wondering delight, and mark how the clumps of waving ferns and tender mosses cling as for dear life to the sides of its rocky confines, and bow their meek heads beneath the giant spray.

Impressed by its grandeur, we retrace our steps, and

are soon again rowing merrily over the lake toward Glena Bay, where the queen's cottage stands, and where Carrie had made some kind mention of permitting us to land and appease our appetites.

"How deep the lake seems!" says Muriel pleasantly. She is leaning over the edge of the boat in a graceful attitude, trailing her slender fingers through the rippling water.

"About here is the deepest part o' the lake, miss," says James, condescending for once to notice her, as Carrie seems wrapped in thought, "here or a trifle lower down. Three hundred an' fifty feet it is in all, miss, as I'm tould—higher than the highest steeple anywheres." Here he notices with joy that Carrie's interest in his conversation is awakened once more, and his handsome Irish eyes kindle as he moves his friendly glance from Muriel to her. "'Twould take ye a fortnight, or maybe three weeks, to git to the bottom of it," he says to Carrie, with a sly laugh, full of a certainty that she will join in it. She does.

"Ah! *that's* the cottage," says Muriel, when we have passed Darby's Gardens and got well into the beautiful bay of Glena. "What a little thing, but how prettily thatched!"

There is a tiny landing-place, at which we go ashore, and walk up to inspect the rustic but charming resting-place the Earl of Kenmare had arranged for her majesty on her *one* visit to Ireland. Had that visit been repeated, and some little love to the warm-hearted people shown, would not much of the bloodshed of late years have been averted? It is too unhappy a question to be pursued. We leave it, then, and go up to the cottage where her majesty lunched in '61—"just twinty-two years ago, ma'am," said James, as we left the boat.

We walk all around it, and admire through the shutterless windows the pretty pink-fluted cretonne coverings of the drawing-room walls, and all the little choice knick-knacks that lie about the rooms. There is an air of indescribable loneliness about it, only heightened by the idea that it is lying there, swept and garnished, waiting for an impossible comer. The cretonne we gaze upon is new, a dainty covering for the walls, but unworthy of a queen. In her time they were clothed

with pink satin, lined with yellow sarcenet; I quote from James.

Seeing that hunger aggravates all evil feelings, I now suggest luncheon in a tone that admits of no trifling, and soon a dainty meal is spread for us upon a broad strip of grass. We spread ourselves before it and fall to.

It is an excellent luncheon, and should have worked wonders, but some people are beyond all genial influences. Jones (to his credit be it said) thaws slightly beneath the bubbles of the champagne, but Brooke remains gloomy to the bitter end. Somehow I lose my faith in Brooke.

And now, too, the sunshine turns unfriendly. It sinks to rise no more. Where has it gone? Perchance behind that huge, mournful cloud that now hangs in heavy grandeur over Tomies' devoted head.

"It looks like a squall," I remark, casually, whereupon they all gird up their loins and flee to the boat.

Carrie, who is a person full of energy, is the first to enter it.

"Oh, I *do* hope it won't be much!" says Miss Kingsley, still lingering on the brink. "Do people ever get upset in these lakes?" She asks this nervously, drawing back from the boat, and looking up at Brooke with a hopefulness in his reply that must, I believe, contain in it some element of tenderness. She moves nearer to him, and lays her hand with a pretty, half-frightened gesture upon his arm. He thrills, and grows twice the man he was, beneath the ecstasy of that light touch.

"Oh, no! no *indeed!*" he says, reassuringly. "You must not let yourself be unhappy for even an instant. There is no fear, none: *I* shall be near you." He flushes crimson, and for one ecstatic moment lets his hand fall upon hers as it rests upon his arm. *Does* he squeeze it? I watch him narrowly, and so does Carrie, but neither of us, when comparing notes, can be sure. "There is no danger at all," he says, his voice trembling with glad agitation.

"You are then prepared to swear that no one was ever drowned in this lake?" breaks in Jones, with a sardonic laugh.

"I am at least always prepared to assuage the fears of a lady," returns Brooke, severely.

"Even at the expense of truth?" asks Jones with diabolical persistency.

I can see he is fuming. The sight of those little, fragile fingers clasped round Brooke's arm is more than he can peaceably endure. Somehow I feel for him.

"What has truth got to do with it?" asks Brooke, angrily, but uncertainly.

"With your assurance? *nothing*," says Jones. "There were two men drowned not very far from this only last year!" He gives Muriel a withering but anguished glance, and springs almost rudely past Brooke into the boat.

"Here, give me an oar!" he calls out, roughly, to one of the boatmen, as though he would have said, "Here, give me your sword to fall upon!"

"Oh, Mr. Jones, not *yet!*" cries Muriel, leaning toward him and holding out her hand—that perjured hand! She has forsaken Brooke's support, and now seems to have centred all her hopes of safety upon the blighted Jones. "Not until you have helped me to my seat," she says, quite anxiously. "No, no, Mr. Brooke; you do not know so much about these small boats as Mr. Jones, and I have often heard they are easily cap—capsized. Is *that* the word, Mr. Jones? If you won't mind holding my fur cape for a moment," with a heavenly glance at Brooke, "I think I will ask Mr. Jones to place me safely on that cushion over there. I can trust myself altogether to him," with a lovely smile at Jones, thrice-blessed Jones. "Do you know," bending forward to give her hand to Jones, and leaving it in his for the beatific time it takes her to slowly finish her sentence, "stepping down into anything always makes me feel giddy, and as though I *must* fall forward into somebody's arms?"

This suggestion, I can see, is too much for Jones; he, too, grows giddy. Fearing lest he may fall forward into *her* arms, I strike boldly into the conversation, with a view to restoring order.

"Do you ever feel like that, Carrie?" I ask, in a tone that I hope is without latent meaning. But who can bamboozle his wife?

"*Always!*" she says, in a voice that admits of no compromise.

"So glad I am not the *only* coward in creation," says Miss Kingsley, smiling again at Jones, who is now as radiant as a rose in bloom, and, springing lightly into the boat, she subsides into the seat next me with a sigh of unmistakable relief. Is that sigh meant for *me?* I feel I am growing mixed. Is it Jones? is it Brooke? or is it——

"Carrie, you don't look comfortable there: come here. close to me," I say, aloud, with a sternness that is foreign to my usual sweetness of demeanor.

"No; I think I'll stay here. I can't take my eyes off Tomies," returns Carrie, dreamily, basely declining to come to my support. Whereupon I give myself up for lost. If any further attention is shown me by a certain person, what will *not* be done to me by certain two other persons? "Answers to be posted no later than Saturday, the 15th."

Jones was taking off his coat, and is now rowing with all his might and main.

"If doughty deeds my lady please,"

Miss Kingsley certainly ought to be charmed. He pulls as vigorously as if his life depended upon each stroke, and looks as well as a stout young man *can* look in his shirt-sleeves. I fancy there is a grim satisfaction in the gaunt features of Brooke as he gazes at him.

I think I have forgotten to say that one of our youths is tall and slim (Brooke), the other short and stout (Jones), which facts, taking them as a whole, should redound to the credit of neither, as what one loses in height, he gains in breadth, and *vice versâ.* This appears to me to equalize all things, but who shall say how it appears to Miss Kingsley? And, after all, that is the principal thing to them.

To look at them, one would give the palm to Brooke, but I cannot help thinking there is a great deal in Jones besides his "too, too solid flesh." And, at all events, of one thing I am quite assured—that there is a very great deal in Miss Kingsley.

A few drops fall pattering upon our uplifted faces. The sky has grown strangely dark. It is nearly five o'clock, I find by looking at my watch, and a shadow from the coming night already lies on all around. Is it going to rain?

"Divil a sign of rain!" says James, when appealed to anxiously because of certain feathers in hats. "Don't be afeared, ma'am: 'tis only the paspiration from the hills!"

Perhaps he is right, or perhaps he has whistled to the clerk of the weather office to spare us; but, at all events, the mists disperse, and from behind them comes a weird light, grand, mysterious, that falls on Tomies in a pale brilliancy, and lights up all its vales and summits, and seems to tremble in mid air. Straight down from heaven itself it comes, to rest lovingly upon the everlasting hills, and soften into calmer outlines the sternness of their rugged grandeur.

Then this too fades, and far, far above us, half resting on the mountain-peaks, falls a dense mass of sullen clouds, gray, tinted with a sluggish blue. Straight out from the sky they stand, as though a man might put his hand behind them, and from them uprise fantastic towers and turrets that form themselves into ghostly castles, not all unlike the stately ruins that frown upon the Rhine; whilst in between all these flash gleams of richest crimson, blood-red from the vanishing sun, darting upward through the heavy gray, as it were flames from some wild Inferno.

"How weird! how wonderful!" says Carrie, in a low tone. We are all silent. The very boatmen rest upon their oars to gaze upon the gorgeous panorama. Then, after a little while, when we have grown almost oppressed by the unearthly beauty of it, the scene changes; the clouds lift and soar again once more heavenward, and Tomies comes out from behind them, purple and yellow and red as before.

A thin thread of smoke curls slowly upward from the centre of the large valley that almost divides it in two.

"Does any one live on Tomies?" asks Carrie, turning to James.

"Iss, ma'am; one man, a tinant, a kind of care-taker of Herbert of Muckross. He's all be himself there. That's the man, ma'am, can't quarrel wid his neighbors. And, begorra, a fine thing 'tis for him too," with a grin.

"It didn't save him, anyway," says the other boatman, opening his lips for the first time. "He said a word in court agin one o' the boys" (Leaguers) "for stealin' a bit o' wood over there, an' they fired into his house one night last week, as he sat be his fire.

"Good gracious! they didn't kill him?" asks Carrie, in horror, yet turning her eyes with a desperate hope upon the thin line of smoke. If he is dead, who lit the fire? This is an eerie thought, suggestive of ghosts, and therefore full of joy.

"He wasn't kilt out an' out, ma'am, but 'twas a near shave. He had his little gossoon upon his knee, an', feggs, the bullet wint right betwixt him an' the child. They do say the little chap has been a thrifle deaf since But sure he needn't care, since they left the life in him, glory be——"

"Oh, that wicked Land League," says Carrie, with startling vehemence. "What misery it has brought upon this wretched country! Hanging is too good for the miscreants that belong to it!

"Good heavens!" think I, "what rashness, to deliver herself of such sentiments as these in a loud voice in the midst of disaffected Kerry!" I gently press her toe, after which I catch her eye, a rather irate eye, so I greatly fear I have hurt her.

"Take a good look at the man that isn't James," I say in a careful whisper. "He is an advanced member of the society you have just been alluding to in tones of mild censure. Follow up your late remarks, and probably you will find yourself in another moment or so buffeting the angry waves."

"I don't see any waves," says Carrie, who is hopelessly unimpressed by my fervid remonstrance. "And as to suppressing my thoughts about that odious League, don't expect it, George; on such a subject I decline to temporize."

"Would you drown us all," I say, indignantly, "for the sake of your principles?"

"Would you have me be false to my principles?" retorts she, fixing me with a stony gaze.

"I would have you remember that, whatever it may be to you, life is sweet to me, principles or no principles," say I.

"That is too loose a sentiment for me to entertain,' returns she, with a scornful tilting of her little nose. It occurs to me at this moment that I used to think it a pretty nose. Is it pretty?

"Well, you can follow up your present wild course in stead," say I, ominously; "but when presently you find

yourself on your downward course to that lowest part of the lake James told you of just now, I dare say you will repent."

"Downward course? Lowest part of the lake? Is it the bottomless pit you are alluding to? Is this a sermon?" asks she, flippantly. Whereupon we both laugh.

"You are such a goose!" she says, radiantly, and gives me to understand, by a faint gesture of her hand, that she here relinquishes all faith in ever being able to make much of me. She goes back to her contemplation of Tomies and the spot where the murder was not committed.

"After all," she says, smiling at James, "you see that man, though alone on that mountain, did manage to quarrel with his neighbor."

James grins back at her in sympathy.

"'Tis hard to know who's yer neighbor, ma'am," says he, shaking his head.

"Why should neighbors quarrel? Why should any one quarrel?" demands Miss Kingsley, pensively, looking at nobody in particular. Nobody in particular answers her.

"Thrue for ye, miss," says James, vaguely, who is always glad to hear his own voice.

"I pity any poor man living up there all by himself," says Carrie, glancing toward Tomies, now looking lonely as the evening descends.

"'O Solitude! where are thy charms?'" say I, being much given to the utterance of unhackneyed quotations.

"Yet solitude has its charms," says Mr. Brooke, in a peculiar tone. "It enables one to escape from the world with one's sorrow and nurse it in secret. To be able to hug one's grief in private is a luxury known only to the miserable. Solitude, too," with slow and terrible emphasis, "enables one to escape from the society of those whose presence has grown to be not only distasteful, but a curse!"

A shivering silence. What is going to happen next? What means this fierce young man? Will Jones come to the scratch? Will he pick up the glove? I am pained to see that Carrie looks full of a certain glad excitement. Miss Kingsley trails her fingers through the water, and seems absorbed in a happy abstraction.

"You are right there," says Jones, resting on his oar, the better to glare at his foe. "To feel assured that one need never again be offended by the sight of a detested somebody would be a boon sweet enough to render even isolation Paradise. There are some," with a deadly glance, "of whom I would gladly see the last."

"For once I can agree with you," says Brooke.

"There is at least one," continues Jones, who, I can see, is determined to push matters to a dangerous point. As he says this, it seems as though he edges somewhat in the direction of his adversary.

"There is one," retorts Brooke, making as decided a movement toward him.

Will they meet? Is it time to interfere? I sit trembling, in momentary expectation of seeing a mortal struggle between two misguided men, to be finished only by an annihilation of both as complete as that of the Kilkenny cats, when Miss Kingsley's low clear laughter, full of gentle merriment, falls upon the air.

"Do look at this, Mr. Brooke," she says, gayly, holding up her fingers to let some of the sparkling water-drops fall from them. "See what dear little circles they make as they fall. And isn't the lake cold? Just feel my hand: it might have been in ice instead of this clear water. Will you feel it, Mr. Jones? It is the strangest thing."

Where does the strangeness lie? And is a ripple on a lake a laughable thing? Yet, oh! how I admire that girl at this moment! I back her up with all my might. It is difficult to get up a laugh about nothing, yet I manage it. I even so far martyr myself as to feel the coldness of her soft hand when the others are quite done with it, which isn't for some time. Her little speech is a blessed relief; but for it I might have had to rise and fling myself between two heated enemies. And in an interference of that sort, in a small boat, the peace-maker is the one most likely to get tipped over the side and plunged in the chilly water. Now, by a soft word wrath has been turned aside, and peace and a treacherous calm once more restored.

Mr. Jones is bending to his oar again. Mr. Brooke has taken a less aggressive attitude, and is sunk in a reverie that (to look at him) must be composed chiefly of recollections of midnight assassinations and murders

in cold blood. Miss Kingsley has returned to the icing of her fingers and the tender contemplation of the scene around. Her eyes are uplifted to the pale-blue sky, her lips are parted. Of what is she thinking? How far have her thoughts flown? or are they still with us?

> "Beneath her eyelids deep
> Love, lying, seems asleep—
> Love, swift to wake, to weep,
> To laugh, to gaze."

But is Dan Cupid really asleep? or is he waking in her breast for Jones or Brooke? There is a soft serenity about her face that masks it well and guards her secret, if any lie behind it.

And now the silence of evening has fallen upon us, and shadows from the mountains are darkening all the lake. There is a tremulous stillness in the air, a grayness on the purple hills. Again we pass Innisfallen, now sunk in gloom, and gaze with lingering eyes on the wooded sides of Ross. A flock of wild ducks, startled by our approach, flutter angrily from the little bay in which they are preening themselves, and disappear round some shadowy corner. Then silence again, broken only by the monotonous music of the oars. And now we have passed the Mouse Island, on which two lonely corbies sit in solitary grandeur, watching us with motionless interest until we have gone beyond their vision; and so past the prison of The O'Donoghue and Heron and Lamb Islands; and now the men quicken their stroke, and presently there is a grating sound, and we know we have touched land, and have come to the end of our first day's excursion.

CHAPTER II.

Dinner passes off dully enough, being enlivened by only one small skirmish between our youths. The terrier is its innocent cause. His edible attentions to Miss Kingsley have been accepted by her in such a kindly spirit, and have been rewarded by such a sweet smile, as might have raised feelings of envy in an anchorite.

Perhaps Jones, who is not an anchorite, sees this

smile, and grows jealous of it, even though it is bestowed upon a minion. At all events, he forgets the matter then in question and grows irrelevant in his replies to Carrie.

"I wish I was a waiter," he says pensively, almost immediately after that lovely smile has been made a present to the terrier.

"On Providence?" asks Brooke, with abominable rudeness and a worse sneer. Does he mean a waiter on Providence for the impossible gift of Miss Kingsley's hand? Jones flushes angrily and stirs in his seat, and I feel once again that a cruel crisis is imminent, when Carrie comes nobly to the rescue. How quick these women are!

"I do hope we shall have a fine day to-morrow for our expedition to Muckross Abbey. Don't you, Mr. Brooke?" she says with her most seductive smile, and again a public *exposé* is providentially avoided. But that smile! it used to be mine alone. What the deuce does she mean by now bestowing it upon Brooke?

Shall we ever see the last of these young men? Alas! this is but the beginning of them. What may not happen before we see the end?

There have been few visitors in the hotel besides ourselves during these past two days, so that the drawing-room, as we enter it after dinner, is, comparatively speaking, empty. Need I say we are pursued thither by the smitten ones who hover round us as though fearful, if once they remove their eyes from their siren, she may for ever vanish from their view?

She is clad in a gown of clinging Indian muslin, and is looking more than usually lovely. She has a big yellow sash tied round her waist, and there is a pensive expression in her large eyes.

When Mr. Brooke asks her, in a tone of dying anxiety, whether she is tired, she says, "N—o—t very," with a melancholy languor and a hesitation framed to make him understand that she is in the last stage of exhaustion. Yet just before dinner Carrie had found her in her room in the gayest spirits possible.

"I never saw a girl so full of go, so untirable," said Carrie to me on that occasion.

"But wasn't it all perfect?" says Miss Kingsley now, with a soft smile of delight. "What a quite too lovely

time we have had since this morning! Haven't we, Mr. Jones?"

"I hope to-morrow will hold up and be as fine as this day," says Jones, coming eagerly to the front, being only too glad of the chance to do so. "There is nothing so unpleasant as rain."

"Isn't there?" murmurs she, with a sly laugh, and, with a sudden swift uplifting of the brows, she glances at Brooke, who is now looking in a contrary direction, and then back again to Jones. It is all the work of a moment, got through in the twinkling of an eye, but it upsets many of my preconceived ideas. Is there, can there be, an understanding between her and fat Jones? and has she all this time been holding up the lean and haughty Brooke to ridicule? I feel I am losing myself in a hopeless labyrinth of doubt. Is she calling Brooke "unpleasanter" than the rain? or do I grow fanciful? Jones, at all events, grows radiant. If I have misinterpreted that laughing glance, so has he, and rejoices now exceedingly in the probable discomfiture of his hated rival.

He grows genial, and, sinking into a chair between Carrie and Muriel, enters into an animated conversation with both. Brooke, at a distant table, is "curving a contumelious lip," and pretending to find absorption in a dismal book of views and a heavy-nosed spinster who is telling him some incident about her stay at Wagga-Wagga. In spite of his assumed haughtiness of demeanor, I can see that ever and anon he casts a fiery glance at Jones. He is altogether out of the running, as it seems to me, and I am just beginning to be distinctly sorry for him, when something unexpected happens.

Jones, Carrie, and Miss Kingsley are discussing a knotty point, on which, to judge from Jones' excitement, the fate of Europe must surely hang. They have now come to the close of their argument, and Jones has just begun a peroration likely to last far into the middle of the night. It is addressed exclusively to Carrie, as (need I say it?) Miss Kingsley's opinion on this all-important subject has been his.

"Yes, yes," says Muriel, softly clapping her hands; "how well you express my thoughts! Go on; convince Mrs. Desmond, whether she will or no, and let me find her a true convert when I return. I sha'n't be long,

but I must get a little air and a smile from that lovely moon."

She glides gracefully away from Carrie's side, when she has said this, to the open window at the lower end of the room, near where Brooke is sitting in direst discontent. She says nothing as she passes him, refrains even from a glance, yet there is something in her attitude as she leans out of the window, a faint but perceptible sweeping aside of her skirts, that brings Brooke to her in a moment.

"What a night!" he says tremulously.

She turns to him with a pretty smile, and draws her skirts even a little more to herself, so letting him into the embrasure of the window, close to her.

"A night to remember," she says, in a low, tender tone, and with a little sigh that might mean anything—love of the brilliant moonlight, or love of——

"To remember forever," returns he, with effusion.

He is right. From where I am sitting I too can see the glories of the scene without—the lake, clothed in moonbeams, the glittering stars, the dark waving of the fir-trees. Across the scintillating waters, straight from Tomies, a pale path of fire is lying, so clear, so brilliantly defined, that one almost believes in the possibility of travelling on it toward that dark, high mountain from whose foot it seems to spring.

Innisfallen, too, stands bathed in the mystic light, while its trees rustle and sway beneath the touch of the meek summer wind that passes over it. The scent of roses is in all the air, and comes to us through the window, blown in by some passing breeze; a strange mourning cry from some wild bird alone breaks the stillness of the outer world; even the restless wavelets have sunk to slumber.

> "A sense of heavy harmonies
> Grows on the growth of patient night
> More sweet than shapen music is."

Miss Kingsley, in her white gown, is standing gazing out upon the fairness beyond, with a little rapt, intense expression on her face. But every now and then she lifts her eyes to Brooke's and murmurs something that we cannot catch, strain our auricular organs as we may. I say we, because I wish to support Jones, to whom now

all my sympathy has gone out. From where we sit we can see the window, the fickle siren, and the detested Brooke. Not a gesture, not a smile, not a glance, is lost on the agonized wooer near me. His argument with Carrie languishes. He makes a wild effort to sustain it, grows first weak, then foolish, and finally loses the thread of his discourse altogether, after which occurs to me the fearsome thought that he is on the verge of frenzied tears.

It occurs also to Carrie. She grows very red, stammers something nobody can understand, and then basely throws him over upon me.

"George, you know *écarté*, don't you?" she says sweetly.

"Yes," return I limply.

"Then you and Mr. Jones can have a nice little game. You know *écarté* too, don't you, Mr. Jones?" This she says with her most insinuating air.

"No," returns Jones defiantly; "I do not."

"No! Then why not some other game, and let me join you? Loo is a nice little game," says Carrie cheerfully, placidly ignoring the fact that for the past three weeks she has been striving to impress me with the idea that it is the most iniquitous game going, and one sure to bring the player of it to a place unmentionable.

"I don't know one card from another," says Jones, not to be won. Plainly, he won't play. Indeed, there is little game in him, as any one might guess, gazing at his lowering countenance. What is to be done with him now? what fresh exertion to be made on his behalf?

At this moment there is a movement in the window. Miss Kingsley leans forward and bends her charming head in our direction.

"Carrie, I think I shall go out to get a last little peep at the moon without the interference of the curtains," she says, swaying those lace appendages gracefully to and fro, "they come in one's way so. And, besides, I think I shall get a better view of—of everything from outside."

"Very good, dear," says Carrie, affectionately, though I know she is inwardly quaking; "but put something round you."

"Yes, something round you—a very wise suggestion. You really must; something round——"

Brooke seems to be mumbling all this in a very fever of anxiety as he follows her from the room, as though wild with fear at the very thought of this exquisite creature catching cold in her beautiful nose.

At the door Miss Kingsley casts a last little smiling glance at Carrie and then vanishes, Brooke in her train. They are gone ; there is no longer an excuse for silence. What on earth is to become of Carrie and me ?

I am afraid to look at Jones ; so is she. Why doesn't he speak ? Is he going to have a fit ? I cast at him a cautious glance, and see that he is staring at a huge flower in the carpet with an expression that should be equal to the withering of half a dozen Brussels roses. He looks like one condemned, or one, at all events, who ought to be condemned. Their is an air of "premeditated crime" about him.

Then suddenly, as though come to some awful resolve, he rises, rushes with mad haste to the door, and disappears—whither ? and for what ?

In blank dismay we gaze at each other.

"Hadn't you better follow him, George ?" whispers Carrie at length—with great want of consideration, I must say.

"And leave you here alone !" I exclaim. "He may return by some other door. And there was madness in his eye : didn't you notice it ?"

"No," says Carrie, "I didn't. But he certainly seemed in a horrible temper. What if he should meet—the other ? How would it be then ?"

"How is it being now ?" return I, with strong effect.

"Oh, George, don't speak like that !" says Carrie, growing a shade paler. "Good gracious ! if anything serious were to happen between those two misguided young men, think how dreadful it would be for Muriel ! She would feel it keenly."

"Not so keenly as Brooke," say I.

"She is a sensitive girl : if she thought she had been the cause of a quarrel between Mr. Jones and Mr. Brooke it would hurt her very much."

"Not so much as it would hurt either Jones or Brooke," I persist, seeing her unimpressed by my former hint.

"Oh, George, is this a time for jesting ?" murmurs

she, with tearful reproach, which shows how a man's most innocent motives may be misconstrued.

I make a mild protest.

"Who is jesting?" I ask, which leads to a prolonged discussion, that, thank goodness! takes her mind off the subject of my pursuit of the infuriated Jones.

Still it seems quite a long time before Muriel enters alone. She comes up to us, and seats herself beside Carrie, calm and gently smiling, as usual.

"Where did you leave Mr. Brooke?" asks Carrie presently, with a quaver in her clear tones.

"Outside, on the hall door-steps, with Mr. Jones," says Miss Kingsley indifferently. "They seemed to want a little private conversation with each other, so I came away."

"You left them alone together?" says Carrie with a little gasp.

"Yes, dear. I know what men mean by conversation: it is always a cigar, and I hate the smell of it. I dare say we sha'n't see them again for an hour or so."

Even as she says this the sound of voices, coming from the gravel outside the windows, reaches our ears. They are not pleasant voices; they rise and fall as though in angry dispute, and certainly the rising is greater than the fall. Then they lessen, as though the owners of them are battling their way round a corner, and presently there falls an awful silence. Will there be presently, perchance, a scream?

It seems an intolerable time before the door opens, and Jones once more appears to us in the flesh. But where is Brooke? Has he been foully murdered? Is his corpse now lying beneath an arbutus tree, or is it floating on the shining lake, with all the stars of heaven, etc., looking down upon it? We sit in cold, shivering anticipation of what is yet to come.

And he—the culprit, the criminal—what of him? How can he thus face us, with the brazen front of one inured to guilt? What saith the miscreant?

"I never saw such a duffer as Brooke at billiards," he says, with a well-simulated scorn. "A baby could teach him. I was watching him just now, playing with a fellow from Tralee, and really it was pitiable—not a chance for him, and the fellow from Tralee chuckling. It's ab-

surd, a man's trying to play when he doesn't know a cue from a tennis racket."

Recollections of Montgomery and Lamson cross my eyes. How well these hardened criminals dissemble!

"It's extraordinary how some people will believe in people," goes on Jones. "There's that man from Wiltshire betting like fun on Brooke. I can't bear a fool, so I laid him two to one against Brooke, and I think"—with a short laugh—"he'll find himself a little out in the morning."

"You say Brooke is in the billiard-room?" say I, with artful lightness.

"Oh, yes; he's there, safe enough," says Jones, unmistakable exultation in his tone.

Is the exultation due to the fact that he knows his rival to be lying cold and stark beneath the summer sky? Can depravity further go? "Safe enough" from further interference with his hopes! Is that what he means? How can he sit there, looking so blandly cheerful, so fatly triumphant, with no touch of remorse in any feature? The awful thought that this is not his first murder occurs to me, and strikes me dumb.

Meantime Carrie is stooping over to me. "I don't believe a word of his story," she whispers hysterically. "Go and see where poor Mr. Brooke really is."

Feeling that an encounter with a dead man must be less productive of harmful results than an encounter with a live one, I rise, though with considerable reluctance, and prepare to set forth in quest of the missing Brooke.

A sharp exclamation from Carrie stays my movements, which are not perhaps as full of eager haste as she could have wished. I turn; I see; I'm disgusted!

Yes, here is Brooke! as gaunt, as grave, as pleased with himself as ever. A feeling that I hate Brooke grows on me. There is a sort of meanness in a fellow who leads his friends up to the pitch of weeping over his untimely demise, and then suddenly disappoints them of their grief by reappearing again.

"I won that game, after all," he says, in slow, measured tones, casting a malignant glance at Jones. "You've lost your money to that Wiltshire fellow."

This was too much for Carrie, who had been fondly hoping that it was his ghost who had stalked into the room, and not a *bona fide* Brooke. Rising, with some

severity she says she is tired, and declares her intention of going to bed forthwith. No one says her nay.

Miss Kingsley, getting up gracefully from her chair, gives her hand to both her admirers, and a divine smile to me. On the corridor upstairs she kisses Carrie, and vanishes into a pink-and-white cretonne bower.

"I think it will be Mr. Brooke," says Carrie to me, with a knowing shake of her small head.

CHAPTER III.

LAST night's stars did not shine so brightly for nothing: they were the heralds of a perfect day. Such a sun! such a blue sky! such singing of birds and perfume of roses!

"Who says Killarney is always behind a cloud?" demands Carrie, with gay contempt, as she springs lightly, and with a terrible want of caution, into the ancient and rickety vehicle that waits to convey us all to Muckross Abbey. Need I say that in this "all" the belligerents are included?

I had tried my best all the morning to escape them, but in vain. They seemed to be everywhere that I was, and many and various were the devices they employed to outwit each other and render their pursuit of me seemingly the careless accident of the moment. At length I was finally encountered, in the most unexpected (?) way in the world, in a small passage—unfrequented, as a rule—where I had erroneously believed myself to be safe from discovery. Here I was run to earth by Jones and Brooke, both bearing down upon me from different directions. But for a certain lowness of spirits that just then suddenly took possession of me, I could have laughed aloud at the situation generally. The indignation of Jones at finding Brooke in this secluded spot was only to be equalled by the disgust of Brooke on beholding Jones. I, the victim, was almost forgotten in the indignation born of that discovery.

They looked so capable of any atrocity that it flashed across my mind how inhuman a thing it would be to leave them at home together. Who could tell what would come of it? Yes, as a Christian man, I felt it my

duty to take one of them whithersoever I might be going this afternoon. To be the means of separating them would insure me an approving conscience, and perhaps enable us to enjoy this excursion, at all events.

I decided on Jones. Brooke, as it seemed to me, had had his innings last night, and should now give Jones a chance. I did my best to take Jones aside and proffer him the desired invitation out of earshot of the other, but that other was too many for me. He held to me like a leech, and regarded Jones with such a threatening eye that I quailed beneath the fear that vengeance sure and deadly would follow on my showing favor to one above the other.

I gave in. Metaphorically, I took them by the hand and declared the dearest wish of my life was that they should both accompany me to Muckross. This lie I told without a blush, though, even if I had so far committed myself, I feel sure they would have refused to notice it. They accepted my invitation with effusion. Jones wrung my hand; Brooke, laying his bony fingers affectionately on my shoulder, asked me if I was sure Mrs. Desmond would not like some extra wraps in case of rain. I am vanquished.

Presently we all find ourselves in the extraordinary old fossil they are pleased to call a wagonette, which is perhaps a little more like a hearse than anything else, and is no doubt an heirloom in the manager's family. It is quite the most amazing conveyance I ever beheld, and strikes one with admiration in that it can shake so much without falling to bits.

The driver is worthy of his vehicle. He too is a family jewel, to judge from his patriarchal appearance. He is full of startling possibilities, and is not the less interesting because he happens to be an enigma to us from first to last. He rejoices in a club-foot, and has had no opportunity afforded him of finding pleasure in a palate. That luxury nature has denied him, so that his utterances are fraught with mystery, and are as shrouded in obscurity as any dark sayings of a Delphic oracle. You see, after all, a man can't have everything.

He says "horck" to his horses when he means "go on," and "tock" when he means "stop." There is a delicious vagueness altogether about his conversation that delights Carrie. She is a long time discovering the

real interpretation of the remarkable monosyllables just mentioned, but, when light dawns upon her, she is much pleased with them, and gives us the impression, in a general way, that they are much superior to the English we less gifted people use.

He is a man, too, of an unnarrowed mind, bound by no petty prejudices. This knowledge of him I deduce from the fact that he calls his near horse Bob and Kate indiscriminately, and the off one Paddy and Moll. He has altogether a nature far above the common run, and we immediately strike up a friendship with him, warm and vigorous, and as lasting as that sort of thing always is.

Before starting there is, of course, a subdued scuffle as to who is to be the blessed person elected to sit next our divinity. It is terminated abruptly but gently by that young lady herself.

"You know all about it, Carrie," she says sweetly, slipping into the seat next her friend, and as near the door as woodwork will permit. "I shall sit near you, and expect you to tell me all about the different lovely spots as we go along."

Whereupon Con Sullivan, our driver, whips up his lanky cattle, and we start. Having paid for our entrance into beautiful Muckross, and received our little mud-colored tickets, we drive along the pretty avenue that skirts the Lower Lake. The water is calmly placid; not a ripple shows upon it to-day; some great bare rocks rising out of it seem poised upon its breast rather than riveted fathoms deep below. Upon them some lazy birds are perched.

"What a tranquil scene for a water-color sketch!" says Jones, who has discovered that Miss Kingsley does a little in that way. "Mark that solitary bird upon the nearest rock. Those cormorants always pose with such expression."

"Very picturesque and idyllic indeed," sneers Brooke, already prepared to disturb the serenity of our surroundings, "only it isn't a cormorant; it's a diver."

"All cormorants are divers," maintains Jones, indignantly.

"But all divers aren't cormorants," persists Brooke pugnaciously.

"Now, who would have thought there were so many

different species," says Carrie, with admirable interest. "Are there so many kinds?"

"Yes, divers kind of divers," says Jones, with a fat chuckle at his own wit.

And now we turn into a dusky glade, and our lean steeds come to a stand-still before a gate, and we surrender our mud-colored tickets to an aged man, and are thereupon permitted to enter the gate way, and directed to turn to the left.

Presently we are all standing in silent admiration before the grand old abbey, sublime in its age and countless memories. In tender appreciation of it, we wander in a loving, lingering fashion through this ancient structure of the Princes of Desmond, gazing wonderingly on nave and transept and choir, and falling into low-toned rhapsodies over the artistic windows. Little trailing wreaths of ivy creep through the crevices Time has made in the stout old arches, and merry, dancing, happy-go-lucky sunbeams are racing hither and thither, now trembling vaguely on the gray lichen that clothes the roofless walls, now sporting idly with the leaves that lie sadly on the earthen floors, now darting out once more to play bo-peep among the solemn tombs outside.

We tread the cloisters reverently, and many a vision we conjure up of Franciscan friars pacing, with bent heads and measured footfall, these broken pavements, with beads held closely between emaciated fingers, and hearts crushed by recollections of the world outside, in which they were no more known at all, and where all the life they had ever lived had been endured. Here they waited for the last great change that should come as a glad deliverance from this lesser death. What tears had fallen upon those irresponsive beads! What voiceless cries, what sighs from poor, pent souls, these cloisters have heard! and what prayers, too, and earnest protestations, and urgent entreaties uplifted to Heaven!

Outside, in the square, a mournful yew-tree casts its shadow over worn arches and corridors. There is a mingling of gray marble and crumbling stone, blue sky and waving branches—a touch of old with the ever new—that impresses us strangely.

We climb the winding stone stairs that lead to other rooms above, and gaze on fresh ruins, and walls fast

decaying, and a growing desolation, full of unutterable loneliness. A keen sense of sadness is conveyed to us by the sweet singing of a little bird that has lighted on the topmost stone of the belfry. Does no awe of the long-buried dead oppress this tiny songster? or is its tender melody in unison with calm thoughts of those so long passed away? Is this a soft requiem to which we are listening with moist eyes and parted lips? Through all the exquisite ruins, from ivied wall to tower, from tower to oriel window, and from thence to moldering graves beyond, the gracious music thrills, lightly, harmoniously, full of a gentle ecstasy, fit emblem of a pure spirit that knows no fear.

And now we have wandered out again into the sunshine, that seems to rest with lingering gladness upon the quaint old walls, to read the names upon the sunken tombs that are scattered thickly through the mossy grass. Some are so worn that even Jones, whose sight is supposed to be his strong point, cannot decipher the letters upon them, much to Brooke's satisfaction. And now we bid good-bye to the sweet old abbey, and leave it with a sigh for its glories seen to-day, but perhaps, so sadly uncertain is life, never to be seen again.

We scramble into our places, Con cries "Horck!" with renewed energy, and away we go again through the demesne toward Dinish Island. Our road lies through a peninsula, with the Middle Lake on one side of us and Lough Leane on the other, and all our way is bordered with flowering arbutus and golden furze. And there on our left is Torc Mountain, and there on our right is Tomies, with the placid waters sleeping beneath them both. It is a drive of unsurpassed beauty, of a richness so sufficing that when at last we come to Dinish Island, and Con, pulling up abruptly, cries "Tock!" to his horses, and tells us, in a peremptory tone, to get down and go to see old Weir Bridge, we feel almost aggrieved as being saturated with nature's loveliness, and feeling that truly our hearts can hold no more.

Nevertheless we obey our Jehu, and stroll in the direction pointed out to us by the palateless Con; and surely our obedience is rewarded.

O charming scene! methinks mine eyes can rest upon you even now, so distinctly does the fair vision rise be-

fore me, so calm, so gentle, so placid in this violent world, a little speck of perfect beauty in the great mass, hidden away from the turmoils that vulgarize our lives, to refresh the souls of the poor, weary pilgrims who may chance to light upon it on their toilsome way.

It is all before me—the two quaint old arches, time-defying, moss grown, and ivy-crowned; the rushing, murmuring water, the great sense of farness, the dream of goodly things as yet unknown, where the trees hide the view, and where the water bends and sails round the emerald corner of grass and ferns to the unknown beyond.

How many years has this old bridge seen? What changes, sad, solemn, and gay, have taken place in the lives of myriads since first its stones were raised one upon another! what revolutions have shaken the earth, whilst it still stood proudly erect, waiting for the destruction that as yet has not overtaken it!

Carrie has slipped her hand within my arm. I suppose the tranquil beauty of the spot has given her strength and grace to forgive me my many shortcomings. Miss Kingsley is standing a little apart from us, with folded hands and chin slightly uplifted. There is in the very silence of the place power sufficient to produce grave thought in most people. But not in Jones and Brooke. The place has not yet been found strong enough in ideality to subdue their rancor toward each other. In the background, just behind Miss Kingsley, they are now carrying on a dispute, lively if subdued. Jones, upon our leaving the fossil, had, it appears, gained possession of a lace scarf belonging to the inamorata. To this he has clung ever since in a way that proves his determination to do or die rather than surrender it to living soul except its mistress. Though why he should be cumbering himself with it is indeed one of those things that no fellow can understand. That Miss Kingsley should on such a day desire to muffle herself in that black lace is beyond probability, yet still Jones clings to it, in the fond hope that perhaps she may. Yet I think his chiefest joy in guarding something that belongs to her lies in the thought that Brooke has nothing to guard, and is therefore consumed with jealousy.

Indeed, Brooke's indignation at his rival's zeal is both

loud and strong. Ever behind us the battle waxes warmer. We, in front, strive valiantly to appear unconscious of it, but our "weak endeavor" falls through when such words as "sneaky," "underhanded," "low," and so forth, float to us upon the zephyr wind.

I glance at Muriel: how is she taking it? She is standing in a Madonna-like attitude, with the sweetest, dreamiest smile upon her lips. There is a heavenly fairness about this smile that forbids the suspicion that any taint of earthly amusement may be mixed with it. She seems as far from us in thought as though we had never existed for her, and as unaware of the disgraceful squabble behind her as the babe unborn.

Perhaps she feels my eyes upon her; at all events, she turns to me so suddenly and with such a cruel lack of warning, and gives me so surely to understand, in some undefinable way, that she has caught me speculating about her, that I am instantly covered with confusion, and know that I am coloring to the shade commonly attributed to the turkey-cock.

She fixes me with a grave scrutiny until this charming if rather pronounced dye subsides, and then, as though slowly awakening from a pleasant dream, she sighs.

"How it all carries one back!" she says slowly, in her pretty voice, that has in it something mesmeric. "How it makes one lose one's self! Where is everybody? Are you here still, Carrie? I had almost forgotten." She laughs a little. "It is a sleepy sort of old place, though, isn't it, with those pale-yellow gleams of misty sunlight glinting through the trees? And the trees themselves, see how they stoop, as though they want to drink of the running water! But it never stays for them. I feel as if the whole world were somewhere else, and I only here. Ah, Mr. Brooke, you see, if you will stand behind me," with a faint, bewitching smile, "you must forgive me if for one moment I let you slip altogether from my memory."

"A cruel moment for me," says Brooke; "but I could hardly dare to hope I should be remembered amidst all this enchantment."

Here he looks modestly pleased with the author of this really neat speech.

"Well, it is enchanting, certainly. Mr. Jones," turning to smooth down the second belligerent, with a little

gracious air, "do you feel the strange influence of this fairy bridge?"

"I don't know; nothing could make me forget some things," says Jones gloomily. And we are all uncomfortably aware that the boasted tenacity of his memory is as good for his hate as for his love.

"I like that," says Muriel placidly: "it shows strength. Now, I am so easily led by my imagination at any time, even by any absorbing interest of the moment. Oh, how good of you! Did you really think of bringing my scarf? Thank you so much! I think I'll take it from you now. Standing and—and thinking make one so cold."

I can see that this speech pleases both her adorers—Jones, because he believes he has been of service to her, and Brooke, because he believes Miss Kingsley has purposely removed her garment (is a lace scarf a garment?) from the care of the abhorred Jones. They both draw nearer, but still remain sulky and regard each other furtively, as though ready for a skirmish at the very earliest opportunity.

"I think I never saw anything so satisfying," says Carrie, speaking for the first time, and indicating the scene on which we were gazing by a slight wave of her hand, "or so really old. Some day will it fall with a loud splash into its own clear waters, I wonder, and drift away to nowhere? Oh, I hope not! Dear old bridge! how many lovers have stood upon it and leaned clasped hands upon its parapets! If it could speak, how many tender tales it could tell! What would it say, do you think?"

"'I'm wearin' awa', Jean, to the land o' the leal.'"

"Nonsense!" says Carrie, with intense scorn, and a rapid descent into prose. "Don't be absurd."

"There are certain appropriate airs to be sung all along this line," I persist, mildly, "and that's the one for the old Weir."

"I'm sure it isn't," says Carrie.

"Ask anybody," return I, looking bravely round me, secure in the knowledge that our "anybodys" are now in Killarney for the first time.

"Oh, I dare say! I like that," says Carrie, with a most unwifely want of reverence in both her tone and expression. It subdues me. Then she looks round at

the romantic bridge again and the rushing waters, and forgets me.

"How old it is!" she says, with a sigh of satisfaction, as though the principal thing to live for is to find one's self covered with years and damp moss.

"Everything old is nice," murmurs Miss Kingsley—"old ruins, old china, old——"

"Maids," I break in humbly, fired with a desire to help and agree with her, "old dogs, old clothes, old photographs (especially of one's self). Yes, you are right, quite right: age hath its charms."

"I was going to say old friends," says our guest sweetly. "What can be compared with them?" She smiles very prettily and meaningly at Carrie as she makes this gracious speech.

"Very few things, by Jove! for which we should all be devoutly grateful," says Jones suddenly, in an awful voice, that seems to come from under ground and is rich in venom. "I know a fellow who knows another fellow who is about the oldest friend he has, and that fellow hates the other fellow like poison—positively loathes him, by Jove!"

This remarkable speech electrifies us, and reduces us to a state of coma. I am the first to recover.

"It is a riddle," I remark feebly. "It is very kind of you, Jones, very; small games of that sort are, as a rule, so interesting; but you must excuse me if I cannot join, as I never guessed one in my life, never!"

Nobody takes any notice of this kindly intervention. Miss Kingsley has turned her large eyes sympathetically upon Jones.

"What a pity! How sad!" she is saying plaintively, with flickering lashes and quite a mournful droop of her red lips. "I shouldn't like to feel like that: should you?"

"I didn't say I liked it," says Jones.

"Oh, no! of course not," she says hastily. "And we weren't speaking of ourselves at all, were we? We are all good friends here at least."

She has turned toward Brooke now, and has levelled this remark at him.

"I have certainly known Mr. Jones for a—a time," returns he, with reserve.

"We were at school together," says Jones bluntly, which somehow takes the curl out of his foe.

And, by Jove! here was a revelation. So they had been bosom friends at one time—chums, pals, what you will—and now!

"I told you," I say aloud, addressing Carrie, "that appropriate airs should be sung here and there on this excursion. This, it appears, is not only the 'Meeting of the Waters,' as the guide-book tells us, but the meeting of old friends. The air for this occasion is as follows:"

Here I warbled sweetly, "We have lived and loved together," in an excellent tenor.

Did I lay stress upon the word "loved"? I hope not, I think not; but unhappy things of that nature will sometimes seem to occur. I am desolated by a glare from Carrie's lovely eyes, and feel that I am put to stand in a corner for the rest of the day.

"Really! Were you really at school together? How charming!" says Miss Kingsley, with smiling interest.

"For a year or so, not more," admits Brooke reluctantly, and with a miserable attempt at lightness, as though he would fain make it appear to us a week or so, or even less.

"How interesting!" says Carrie, with hypocritical enthusiasm. "And did you never meet since your old school-days until you both came to Killarney?"

"Ye—es; we were at college together," confesses Brooke, still reluctant.

"For a short time," breaks in Jones doggedly. "Needn't be named, it was so limited. Fact is, Brooke had to leave."

He pauses here abruptly, and an awkward silence ensues. He has conveyed to us a most unpleasant impression. Inwardly we all see the reprobate Brooke expelled ignominiously from his college for the commission of some heinous crime. We are secretly debating whether it was fraud, petty larceny, or murder, when Brooke comes furiously to the front. He has marked the effect of Jones' simple words, and is crimson with rage.

"My father's death alone compelled me to leave Cambridge," he says, with a vain attempt at coolness. "Why Mr. Jones should trouble himself to explain my affairs

at all I don't know, but, as he has taken it upon himself to do so, it seems a pity he cannot manage to render himself intelligible."

"What did I say?" demands Jones, in an injured tone, "except that you had to leave?"

"You said I *had* to leave!"

"Well, hadn't you?" says Jones.

"I understand you very well, sir; but I regard your insinuations as beneath notice."

"One wouldn't think so," says Jones; "though what the insinuations are I am at a loss to know."

"I dare say you find it convenient not to know."

"Do you know?" says Jones. "I have, I fear, unwittingly touched upon some sore subject, you have taken my innocent remark so much to heart. If I have in any wise hurt your—finer sensibilities—I——"

"Pray don't imagine anything you could say could have any influence over me," says Brooke, who is plainly boiling with rage, though still bent on maintaining a dignified calm. "You wish to raise doubts in certain minds, but you failed. Ha! you see I can read you like a book."

"What book?" asks Jones.

"Any book," says Brooke, beside himself with indignation.

"Oh, very likely!" retorts Jones, with a diabolical grin. "Any of those many books that stumped you at Cambridge, eh? you remember? What a job you were to old Harding! Ha, ha!"

Now indeed, I conclude, has come the rash Jones' last moment! We had all discreetly turned aside to admire the old bridge again at the beginning of this unseemly fracas, and had made a laudable pretense of being stone deaf in both ears. The lull that has now fallen upon the disputants rather awes us. The skirmish has been short but brilliant and rich in homely truths. We should all love and admire and encourage the truth. Truth resembles leather: there is nothing like it! But Brooke, I fear, does not think so—which gives me pain. He is evidently gathering breath for the annihilation of his enemy, when Miss Kingsley's voice falls again upon the silent air, soft and heavenly sweet, and with that touch of abstraction in it that might come to one who for the past five minutes has been dead to earthly things, lost in a soul-communion.

"I never," she says thoughtfully, "was in any place so formed to make one feel 'kindly affectioned one toward another' as this. One couldn't feel angry here, I am certain. Anger and clamor should be put from this sweet spot."

I stare at her. She has got on a morning-service expression and a rapt, saint-like air. Her large dark eyes are fixed with soft abstraction on the splendor of the scene around—on the orange and purple and faded greens of the leaves and the pure mingling of water and sky. No sound comes to us save the lazy lash of the stream against the stone steps on which we stand, or the distant shriek of a wild bird startled from its island home on the lakes beyond. Her pose is perfect. Her little lecture never came from lovelier lips. Has she felt —does she mean it? That tender sadness, that mild air of gentlest reproof, that suspicion of sorrowful displeasure, from whence have they sprung? She looks now like a mediæval angel, yet I could have sworn that awhile ago I had surprised upon her face a smile of deepest amusement as she listened to that first squabble about her lace scarf. Verily, she is a girl of many parts. I feel my respect for her growing and widening, and determine to show my appreciation of her by agreeing with what she has just said.

"You are right," I remarked cheerily. "'Anger' is a bad thing, and 'glamour' is worse, and when both come together——"

"She said clamor!" interrupts Carrie sharply.

"Oh! eh? I'm sure I beg pardon," I exclaim. After which we return to Con and the quivering wagonette and start for the Torc waterfall.

Our drive is singularly silent. In silence, too, we pay our sixpences to the man who lies in wait for prey at the entrance to the path that leads up to the cataract, and follow each other, higher and ever higher, until our goal is reached. Indeed, were we never so conversationally inclined, speech would be useless to us as we approached the mighty roar of the descending torrent. Our winding path leads us to the very brink of this giant cascade—so near that a step or two would send one whirling downward to death in that magnificent rush of maddened, foaming water. The heavy rains of a week ago show it to us now in all its glory.

With angry joy it springs from rock to rock, dashing its glistening foam far to either side of it, over bending ferns and frightened weeds, as it hastens away, ever downward, with a sullen thunder, into the black chasms beneath. Of the force and power and beauty of it no man can tell. Beside the awful grandeur of its rage how small appear the pretty strifes that disfigure our daily lives! It occurs to me that even the belligerents must feel this and be the better of it; but it is hard to judge, if indeed they feel anything, so impassive are their countenances.

They lean upon their staves and survey the wild grandeur of the falling water with a certain mixed appreciation of its beauty. But I believe a knowledge of the dire power of that waterfall to dash to atoms any life consigned to its cruel mercies is the chief charm they find in it. A step, a push, and jealousy would be avenged!

Brooke is looking profoundly, not to say savagely, serious. Is this a way given him to rid himself of his antagonist? His eyes seek Jones. He seems as though he would cry:

> "*Here, now*, before the lady of our choice,
> Thyself, my mortal foe, will I slay
> With these my proper hands!"

Providentially, Jones is standing directly behind "the lady," so that an immediate attack upon him is impossible.

Green and brown and orange gleams the water as it dashes over the glittering rocks. We watch its tumultuous descent in a dumb delight that is half fear, until it disappears in the dark, leafy gorge through which it flies onward to the lake. On every side are arbutus and the stately fir-trees.

> "The branches cross above our eyes
> The skies are in a net."

Down far below us, spread out in all their living loveliness, lie Lough Leane and the middle Lake, with their numerous fairy bays and "happy isles." All around us is the gloomy grandeur of the darkening hills. Glancing at Carrie, I can see her eyes are full of

tears. Truly she was born with a keen love of the beautiful, a sense to be neither bought nor learned.

"Yet people will say," she murmurs, "'that 'tis expectation makes a blessing dear', and that

'Heaven were not heaven if we knew what it were.'

I don't believe it. They are altogether wrong. This is nearer to perfection than anything I ever expected."

"How pleased, then, you will be with heaven!" I murmur back, though in truth our gentle cooings would be healthy yells if only that waterfall could be induced to move on.

Seeing a slight movement on the part of Brooke, and a growing desire to edge closer to Jones, I here deem it prudent to suggest a return to Con, and, placing Brooke carefully in front of us on the narrow pathway, and desiring Jones to bring up the rear, I pilot my party, in good order and sound in wind and limb, to our triumphal chariot. There is no bloodshed on our homeward drive, and the rest of the evening passes with quite a noteworthy dearth of pugilistic incident of any description.

CHAPTER IV.

Next morning I saunter down-stairs to breakfast in a mood of absolute benignity. There is no fret or jar in any of my thoughts. All my geese are swans, and everything I look upon is dyed with the hue of the vivid rose.

Carrie is not lost to me, but has gone before, and I, in a leisurely and unimpatient fashion, going in search of her, follow my nose into a room off the hall. At the first glance I believe myself to be the sole occupant of this room, and, stepping into the embrasure of a window, gaze out in a blissful wonder at the ever-increasing charms of the sparkling lake. Presently, however, I become aware of two voices at the lower end of the room, coming from the embrasure of another window. One of them I know to be Carrie's; the other, to my surprise, belongs to Brooke. They have both come out of their window, and, unaware of my presence, as I had been of theirs, are now standing where I can see them, apparently in close confab. What on earth can he have

to say to Carrie so early in the morning? I feel it is a case that calls for my supervision, and determine not to listen, but to stay where I am.

"Yes, I do believe there is hope for me," Brooke is saying, in a jubilant yet rather faltering tone. "Oh, Mrs. Desmond, can you guess all that that means to me?"

As he says this there is a fever of tender anxiety in his odious eye. Good heavens! is he making love to her? Am I to learn in "the morning, oh! so early," that I have been fooled and betrayed by a young man who ought to have been expelled from Cambridge, even if he had not been? Surely first thoughts are truest. Did not my first prejudices against these two strange sojourners in Paddyland spring from a true instinct?

"Yes, there must be hope for me!" says Brooke, gazing at Carrie with all his depraved soul in his eyes. As he speaks, he takes her hand. Her hand? my hand! Was it not given to me at the altar? There he is, holding my hand. Never! I'd see him—far first. But, if not mine, whose? I go into a mental calculation as to how many hands I really possess, and come out of it much the worse for wear.

"Hope!" He had said distinctly that he had "hope." Has she, then—the wife of my bosom—been encouraging him in his villainy? Has his pretended affection for Miss Kingsley been but a blind to lay my suspicions? Alas! where are all my peaceful musings of a moment since? Gone to the winds! never, perhaps, to return to my desolate breast. I feel vaguely that this is an occasion on which I should rush forward, dash my hand against my forehead, and cry aloud, "Fool! madman!" to an admiring audience. It occurs to me, too, however (happily in time), that more may be gained by an astute obliteration of my person than by any heroics; so I remain *perdu*, and with a lowering brow prepare to listen and see with all my might.

I am richly rewarded. Carrie, with a fervor worthy a better cause, deliberately squeezes the hand of the degenerate Saxon—under my very nose, as it were, she does it, and without a blush! Still fired with a grim determination to see it out with them and know the worst, I refrain from springing at Brooke's throat and felling him to the earth.

"Yes, ye—es; there is hope!" says Carrie, in the

tenderest, most sympathetic voice, that yet has, as it seems to me, a tincture of hesitation in it—no doubt a last remnant of grace as she remembers her marriage vows and dwells for a faltering instant on her treachery to me.

"Oh, Mrs. Desmond, if you could only know how happy you make me when you say that!" exclaims the vile Brooke, in a tone of ecstasy. Joy sparkles in his hateful eye. Stooping his gaunt frame, he presses his confounded lips in quite a rapturous fashion to the hand that I had deemed mine own but an hour ago.

Paralysis must have seized upon me at this moment. All is a blank. Later on I turn. I make no attempt to annihilate Brooke, because presently, when I return to consciousness, I find him still alive, and still in close converse with Carrie. I nerve myself to listen once again. One more chance of life shall be accorded to this most wretched man.

It is well I so decide. Certainly mercy is "twice blessed." I congratulate myself on my wisdom and Christian forbearance. It was most fortunate that I abstained from the momentary madness that assailed me and would have urged me to the slaughter of a fellow-creature. Now, in one blessed instant, dispelled are all my fears, restored is my faith in the only woman I ever loved.

"You remember the night before last, how she went out alone with me into the moonlight?" Brooke is saying, as I once more come to myself. "She never did that before, you know, and—and she looked at me that night so—so kindly!"

It takes him some time to say this, and he rather hesitates over the last word, as though searching vainly to see if his memory cannot with truth supply some warmer word. Of course I at once grasp the situation, and know by his woe-begone look that he is growing confidential over Miss Kingsley. Poor Brooke! Dear Brooke! I always felt somehow, intuitively, that he was a thoroughly good sort of fellow! Good Brooke!

"She—she doesn't always care to be alone with one, you know," he goes on defiantly. "That is"—with anxious look—"she feels, I mean, a natural maiden modesty that forbids her to make herself conspicuous with any one in particular."

"Quite right, of course. I can quite understand," says Carrie encouragingly, and just as if she means it. Yet I can remember a time when she made herself remarkably conspicuous with me on various occasions and thought nothing of it. And now here she is upholding a weak-minded young man in most prudish doctrines.

"But the other night, you may have noticed, she seemed to forget all that; all was different," says Brooke exultantly. He looks glad, triumphant. Why? Would he have her always, then, forgetful of the vaunted maiden modesty? Oh! fie, Brooke, fie!

"Yes, I certainly did notice a change for the better," says Carrie, smiling, whereupon I acknowledge to myself my inability to sound the depths of the female mind.

She looks at him inquiringly, and then goes on a little nervously:

"One doesn't quite like to ask it," she says, "but did she—I mean, did you—that is—in fact, was there anything said that night—eh?"

"Said?" says Brooke.

"Why, yes; anything that might lead her to think that——" She pauses. To me her pause is full of eloquence.

"What?" says Brooke stupidly.

"Why, that you were—— Ah, you know what I mean," says Carrie vaguely, but looking at him with the very largest encouragement in her eyes.

"I don't," says Brooke hopelessly; and instantly the knowledge that I am on the brink of inextinguishable laughter covers me with confusion. With the aid of a handkerchief and the window-curtains I manage to stifle it.

"That you were in love with her?" says Carrie, rather impatiently, and in a higher key.

"Oh, no!" says Brooke, as though shocked. "I shouldn't dare—not so soon, I mean. She isn't that sort of girl at all. She is altogether different from other girls. There is something—something very special about Miss Kingsley, as it seems to me."

"Perhaps so," says Carrie, just a little dryly. "But at least she is a woman, and I never yet knew one who didn't like to hear a man say he adored her. However, as you say, there may be something out of the common about Muriel."

"Muriel? what a divine name!" murmurs Brooke, as though the very mention of it overcomes him.

"It is out of the common, too," says Carrie, smiling. "Now, you speak to me as a friend of Muriel's, of course. You will then let me ask you if you are in a position to marry?"

"I have a thousand a year," says Brooke—"not enough for *her*, I own, but still——"

"People can live very happily on a thousand a year," says Carrie kindly. "And Mr. Jones?"

"He says he has five thousand pounds a year," says Brooke sulkily, and quite as if he believes Jones to be lying consummately in so saying.

"It doesn't matter what any one has," declares Carrie sweetly. "Muriel is too dear a girl to be led by a mere desire for a rich establishment. It is whom she really prefers is the thing, and——"

"Well, I'm positive she prefers me to Jones," says he, firmly. "Of that I am assured. She has never yet permitted him to gaze upon the moon with her, alone. I lay great stress upon that, Mrs. Desmond, and believe I am right in so doing. He has manœuvred over and over again to get her away from the rest of us for even five minutes, but all in vain. He has even tried in the most ungentlemanly way to cut me out in her good graces—me! Ha, ha!" Oh, the sardonic mirth in that wild laugh!

"It is all a great pity," says Carrie, who is evidently at a loss for a pretty hypocrisy.

"I think the other night proved to him who has the best chance now," goes on Brooke feverishly. "Did you see his face when I went to where she stood in the window, looking like an angel in the moonbeams? She welcomed me there: he must have seen that?"

"Yes, he saw that," says Carrie. Is there regret in her tone? Here she is encouraging one suitor whilst, I verily believe, she is feeling sorrow for the other. Were Jones at this moment in Brooke's place, I am certain her sympathy and advice would be just as freely administered.

"Then I hope he learned a lesson," says Brooke vindictively. "His manner toward me all yesterday was distinctly aggressive, but"—loftily—"I overlooked that. I could afford to; it was but the outcoming of a wounded

pride. No, she would never grant to Jones the grace she showed to me. She would never favor him with a private audience."

By this time Miss Kingsley has plainly risen to a sovereign's height. I cannot help thinking that he has made very poor use of the "audience" granted him.

"She certainly hasn't, up to this," says Carrie.

"Mark my words," says Brooke solemnly, "she never will! She positively shrinks from him. I have frequently noticed it. She would not go anywhere alone with Jones for the heaviest bribe that could be offered her."

Even as he says this with an air of settled triumph an awful thing happens. The door is flung wide, and Miss Kingsley (in her hat and scarf, and attended by Jones!) enters the room, her arms laden with branches of flowering arbutus and trailing leaves of water-lilies. Her eyes are sparkling, her cheeks flushed, her lips red and parted. There is an expression of thorough enjoyment about her whole dainty person.

"Oh, we have had such a good time on the lake for the last hour and a half, whilst all you lazy people were abed," she says, smiling. "It was a morning to make one even in love with one's misfortunes."

A dead silence follows her little speech. It is fortunately broken by the entrance of the bull terrier, who, passing close by my place of concealment, gives me the opportunity of emerging from it swiftly as he goes by, and following him in a leisurely, dignified manner up the room. With quite an abstracted, absent air I come up at his heels, feeling all the time, as I bring my mind to bear upon his physiognomy, that he ought to be at mine.

Alas for Brooke's complexion! As he gazes upon the new-comers his self-complacency, his look of victory assured, vanishes, and his color changes from sickly gray to green, and then to ochre: it stays at ochre.

"It was the loveliest row I ever had in my life," goes on Muriel gayly, the soft color of her cheeks brilliant. "We got into one of the very daintiest of little bays, where the arbutus-trees hung over our heads, and let their white bell-blossoms drop into our hands. See! we despoiled them. I brought you home this little branch,

Carrie, to make you pretty for breakfast; and this for you, Mr. Desmond, to pull to pieces. You see, I know what pleases you." She smiles archly, and as though unconscious of the smothered storm so near her, while Brooke, standing right before her, glowers at space and bites his nether lip, and doubtless conjures up a possible moment in the future, fraught with delirious joy, in which he shall rend in pieces the perfidious Jones and tear him limb from limb. Oh, where are all his boastings of a minute since, his vain imaginings? He had declared aloud his belief that nothing would induce her to favor Jones with a *tête-à-tête*, and here now has she come to give the lie to his fond declaration. It is surely not to be borne. He will rouse himself, and step bravely forward and confront Jones, and tell him to his face——

"You see, I did not forget you either, Mr. Brooke," says Muriel sweetly. "I brought you this!"

She holds out to him a tiny spray of forget-me-not. Did that wondrous isle, into whose bay they wandered, produce that too? I don't think Jones knew of the forget-me-not; his face clouds as he sees it presented to the gloomy Brooke.

"But you are not to treat my offering as Mr. Desmond is sure to do," goes on Muriel coquettishly. "You are to be made lovely with it, like Carrie. See! I shall pin it into your coat for you myself, because I know the utterly hopeless stupidity of all mankind."

It is impossible to resist her gracious ways. She is standing now very close to Brooke, pinning the flower with her slender fingers into his coat, and as she speaks she lifts her eyes with a smile to his. In spite of all that has gone before, it is a moment of triumph to Brooke. She is usually calm and gentle and placid as a sleeping lake, but to-day some spirit of gay coquetry has awakened within her. Her mood is full of uncertainties, every movement is full of arch life. Beneath her touch Brooke's discontent vanishes; he is all at once another man. A fig for Jones! What signifies a row with him, when it has finished with a forget-me-not for another?—forget-me-not! that lover's flower, that essence of all true sentiment. Courage returns to the heart of Brooke, and color to his cheeks. Clouds break up and melt away, the skies again are blue. It is ever

so much a finer morning than it was ten minutes ago—a morning almost fine enough to greet Miss Kingsley.

> "Pack, clouds, away, and welcome day,
> With night we banish sorrow;
> Sweet air blow soft, mount larks aloft,
> To give my love good-morrow."

This is our mood. Our moral barometer is at "set fair." So struck am I by the smiling benignity that lights the countenances of the belligerents that I fall away from a stern resolution formed since I rose this morning. Led astray by a kind-hearted but humiliatingly weak belief in human nature, I commit a fatal error: I invite both to accompany us, later on, to the Gap of Dunloe. Both—need I say?—accept the invitation.

CHAPTER V.

Once again Con, the palateless, draws up his horses before the door with a resounding "Tock!" and we all enter the shandrydan that seems to be our only resource in the vehicle line. The manager (who has a wooden face like a figure-head) comes out to wave us a polite *au revoir*. As Miss Kingsley again elects to sit next Carrie, thereby giving preference to no man, the new and much-to-be-admired harmony existing since breakfast remains unbroken. With a renewed sense of security I notice this, and again hope springs within my breast as we drive along the bank of the Lower Lake, from which we have a good view of its beauties before gaining the road.

I have frequently been told by her who should know me best that my heartlessness at times is astounding. Yet I think in my secret soul that, in the main, I am a kindly man. Now it occurs to me that in the many times that I have been taken sight-seeing by troublesome but well-meaning friends, it has ever been expected of me that I should fall into raptures over every curve and stick and stone that we met upon our onward way. Raptures are fatiguing. Perhaps these people with whom I am to-day as guide (being the only one of the party ever in Killarney before) will think it their duty to cry aloud their praises of the scenery, until they begin

to wish they had never seen it. With a view to saving them this annoyance, I determine to act the Good Samaritan and rescue them from the weariness and grinding torment I so often have endured.

"You will see a charming spot to-day," I begin genially; "but, before coming to it, it may be as well to state that I shall expect no one to cry 'how lovely!' 'how divine!' 'how perfect!' or 'how exquisite!' even at the most supreme moment."

I smile blandly on all as I say this, but no answering smile greets mine. My amiable speech has been received with suspicious silence.

"My dear George, I don't think any of us give way to very great extravagance of speech," says Carrie, who appears perversely determined to apply my innocent remark to herself.

"'Divine' is not a word one would care to use," says Miss Kingsley, looking straight at me, with a dear little smile, but yet an undercurrent of resentment. "It is rather vulgar nowadays."

"By Jove! that's your word, isn't it, Brooke?" says Jones, with a most aggressive laugh. "Everything's 'divine' with you, from a *coryphée* to a sunset."

At these words all my fabric built of brotherly kindness between these two young men falls to the ground. Brooke's eyes blaze, his sallow skin grows gray; wrath, subdued with difficulty for some hours past, now bursts forth with redoubled fury.

"You are difficult to understand; you can explain to me your words by and by," he says, in a smothered voice, almost inarticulate with rage. Does this ambiguous speech mean murder, a duel, assault and battery, or what? I am horrified. With the best intentions possible, I have been the cause of a collision that may end—anyhow. Still, I cannot feel myself to blame. "A noble cause," quoth Sir Philip Sydney, "doth much ease a grievous case," and truly mine is noble. I had meant to create comfort and good-fellowship all round, and the Fates alone, in their malignity, have upset my righteous designs.

"Now ye may get down and take a look at the ruins," says Con, in his own vernacular, which I alone—proud boast—can translate.

It is a welcome reprieve. We all scramble to the

ground, and go up to inspect the ancient ruins of Aghadoe, to which Con has insisted on taking us *en route* to the Gap.

The ruins of this old cathedral delight Carrie. For one so bright and full of life, it is astonishing how partial she is to old bones and musty tombs and the melancholy remnants of humanity with which the grounds of Aghadoe are strewn. Over the round tower—or at least what remains of it—Miss Kingsley and Jones fall into ecstacies. To them, too, the Romanesque doorway in the cathedral is a "joy forever." And indeed it is a "thing of beauty," not to be lightly passed by, with its pillars and its semi-circular arch, connected by an exquisite fretwork. A delicate sunlight falling upon all wakes it to even clearer beauty.

"Ah! see those chevrons," says Miss Kingsley, standing back, with her hand to her brows, in an æsthetic attitude, to gaze upward at the arch. She is so far forgetful of her usual calm as to lay her hand excitedly upon Jones' arm.

"And those beads in *mezzo relievo*," supplements Jones, taking advantage of the elevation of the moment to lay his hand on hers. To my amazement she does not resent this, or make any attempt to restore her fingers to her own keeping for quite a minute. When she does so it is slowly and absently, as though unaware that any one has sought to retain them for even a short space of time.

"How sad that all such interesting mementoes of a past age should fade out of our lives so irrevocably!" she says, with a little sigh, turning her limpid eyes on Brooke, who is lost in gloom and declines to emerge from it.

"Is there anything that shows such delicate kindliness as ivy?" says Carrie softly, gazing up at the straggling, fond, clinging ivy that covers the crumbling stones with its loving tendrils. "See how it seeks to hide the defects of its old friend!"

"Yet the defects can be seen," says Brooke, in a hollow tone. After which we all go back to the waiting Con.

A glimpse of fresh mountains, as yet unseen by us, makes us presently forgetful of Aghadoe. Here is Bull Mountain, and a better view of the Reeks than we have

had up to this. And now the little touch of the purple mountain that comes to us from beyond Tomies rises clear and dark against the sky, and Con tells us we are coming closer to the goal of our expectations. We turn the corner of a road all lined with glowing yellow furze that is never out of bloom ("when furze is out of blossom kissing's out of fashion," says a frolicsome old adage), and from behind a hedge springs upon us a gossoon, wreathed in rags and smiles, and armed with roughly prepared sticks made out of the wood of the very furze we have been admiring.

"Dear me!" says Carrie, rather nervously, edging up closer to me as she notes this bare-legged apparition. But not for purposes of war comes he: to sell is all his design.

"A stick, gintlemen? A good furze stick—a K'larney stick, sir? An illegant shillalah, yer honor! Buy it, sir, do! 'Tis dead chape it is—on'y one shillin', yer honor!" cries he, running with easy grace as fast as the horses until we come to a hill, when the latter slacken speed, and the day is his own.

"Oh, what curious sticks! how quaint! And those little ones, how pretty!" says Miss Kingsley, smiling at the half-naked lad, who instantly acknowledges the power of her nameless charm, and goes down before her as abjectly as either Jones or Brooke. He has, however, more audacity than either of those more presentable adorers, and smiles back at her, as she ceases speaking, with the pretty, shy, vivacious humor of our peasants. Like all his race, he loves a pretty face, and, indeed, beauty in any form.

He has good reason to smile at Miss Kingsley, for she brings him luck. The moment she gives it as her opinion that the sticks are to be admired, a regular rage for them sets in. Jones and Brooke instantly regard them as objects of priceless worth. The sum asked for them seems absurdly low. The gossoon's stock is speedily disposed of, to Carrie's infinite satisfaction, who, in spite of his undeniable good looks, continues to regard him as an advanced brigand.

"What have good looks to do with it?" she whispers back to me when I venture to remonstrate with her. "I feel convinced that he is a Land Leaguer, and that that tattered garment hides a revolver.

"Why not say an assegai at once, or a boomerang?" suggest I, with fine scorn.

Each of our youths has by this time cumbered himself with not only one unwieldy weapon for his own use (with a view no doubt, to the amicable settlement of future debates), but with a second slighter rod that one cannot help seeing is meant for Miss Kingsley.

I, too, led away by her favorable mention of the furze sticks, buy one, because I don't want it, and Carrie makes herself miserable with another, with a view to depriving the brigand of a second mode of attack when the revolver fails him. It is a road-traffic connected from time immemorial with the Gap, and we all feel we have done our duty nobly by it when the boy stands stickless before us.

"Miss Kingsley," says Jones, handing her the little stick he has bought for her, just as Brooke is stooping forward to make a similar offer, "pray take this: it will help you to ascend the path at the Gap that Mr. Desmond has been telling us about."

"Yours is too thick, I think," says Brooke, with elaborate politeness and a ghastly attempt at mere friendly interposition in which rivalry holds no part. "This"—holding out his—"will, I fancy, suit her better."

Here is a dilemma for our pretty lady. I watch the next move (hers) with an anxious eye. Once again we stand on the brink of a precipice, on the verge of open war. Something tells me it is Jones's day, that his will be the chosen reed; and, if so, what will Brooke do? Will he "go for" the favored one and fling him beneath the wheels of our chariot? In breathless suspense we all hang upon Miss Kingsley's coming words. She hesitates. It is plain the situation is a little too much even for her. It is indeed a difficult moment, which she employs in dropping a bracelet from her arm and making diligent search for it. But a bracelet, however careful you may be not to see it, does not take long to find when four officious eyes are bent on its discovery, and presently we feel the final moment has come. Brooke and Jones are holding out to her in a truculent fashion two hideous sticks; she has opened her lips to pronounce sentence, when Providence, in the shape of the gossoon, comes to the rescue. He has stolen closer to her side of the wagonette, and now suddenly whisks from behind

his back a straighter, a smoother, a more refined stick than any he has sold. It is indeed a very dandy among furze sticks.

"Maybe the lady will take it, to plaze me?" he says, shyly, thrusting it into Muriel's astonished hand; and before she has time to recover herself, or bestow upon him any largess, he has sprung away from us and disappeared through a gap into a field on our right.

"Oh, what a funny boy! what a pretty boy!" says Muriel. "See! there he is again." We have nearly gained the top of the hill, and, looking back, can see the picturesque boy in his very unpicturesque rags staring eagerly after us. Muriel waves her hand. He tears his torn cap from his head and waves it high in the air; then we turn a corner, and lose him out of our lives forever.

"He was a very pretty boy," says Miss Kingsley, thoughtfully. "And how sweet of him to give me this little present!" She looks affectionately at the rough little stick in her hand. She seems, indeed, inordinately grateful for it. Out of what a dilemma has it not lifted her! "These Irish peasants have such charming ways," she says.

"Here was the very spot, yer honor, where the murdher was done last March," breaks in Con at this appropriate moment. "They batthered out his brains ag'inst thim stones, ma'am, an' left him so that his own mother didn't know him, except by his clothes. May the saints have mercy on us, an' make it up to him, the poor crathur!"

"You are right, they have very pleasant little ways at times," I whisper to Miss Kingsley, who gives me a reproachful glance in return.

"To look at them, one would think them the best-humored people on earth," says Carrie mournfully, "and yet what terrible things they are capable of!"

"Ay, fegs," says Con, "an' not a thing did that poor sowl do but pay his rint regular. 'Twas a bloody deed, an' the night white wid the moon. Glory be—— How could they do it, wid the stars of heaven shinin' down on 'em?"

Here we come to a cottage, or rather hut, out of which half a dozen semi-naked little children rush tumultuously and run after us. The race, at all events, is some-

times to the swift, because they beat Con's horses all to nothing and come up with us in no time, breathless, but triumphant.

"A ha'penny to buy a book!" shout they, as though with one lung. Now this book for which the demand is so loud and unanimous is a primer belonging to their National school, used by these ragged urchins. They believe no well-minded person will refuse them a copper for the purchase of so useful an object, though, in truth, I doubt if the money received by them for that purpose ever goes to the furtherance of their intellectual pursuits.

"And I'm sure, I hope not," says Carrie, whose principles are plainly of the loosest. "I hope they will be able to buy gingerbread or sweeties with it, or something of that sort."

"They won't, thin," says Con, who has grown very affable toward us, and has shown a friendly inclination to strike into our conversation on every available opportunity. "The parints o' thim spalspeens just live by the money they make out o' the tourists in the summer and autumn. More shame to thim, say I, for the bringin' up o' their dacent childher as beggars."

Here we pass another cottage, from which a second shower of children pours out, to mingle with those already in our wake. Soon quite a little army is in full pursuit. One lanky, long-legged girl, echoing loudly the popular cry, attracts special attention.

"Why, you ought to have read every book in your school by this time," says Carrie, laughing at her. "You are too big to go to class."

"Sure, couldn't I read somethin' at home?" says she with a merry twinkle of her large wild eyes. "Haven't ye ne'er a book in yer own house, ma'am?"

"Hard study will spoil your pretty eyes," say I. Whereupon Carrie tells me not to put silly thoughts into the child's head.

"Sorra fear," says the child with a grin, throwing back her head until her brown locks shake again.

"Oh! look there," says Miss Kingsley suddenly—"at that boy with the dark eyes. Isn't he like an Italian, like something of Murillo's?"

She bends forward, and seems wonderfully taken with a little black-eyed chap who runs panting be-

side us, with flowing locks and a face like a dirty angel.

"Isn't he a picture?" she says enthusiastically. "How I wish I hadn't given the others all my small change! I suppose"—hesitating over a half crown that lies in her palm—"this would be foolish, eh?"

"It would be wrong, disgracefully extravagant," says Carrie severely. "Put it away; we have all given them quite as much as they can possibly expect. You"—with flagrant inconsistency—"haven't anything small about you, have you, George?"

I haven't. A careful search in every pocket proves this.

"Let us ask Con for some change, I suggest brilliantly, finding we are all destitute of the lesser coinages. "Got any change, Con?"

"No," says Con sternly; "an' if I had I wouldn't give it to ye. What folly it is, throwin' yer good money about like that! 'Tis too much thim young scamps have got already. An' 'tis shame ye ought to be takin' to yerselves for helpin' thim in their idle, beggin' ways."

No entreaties can soften the obdurate Con, though we now firmly believe that if he stirred in his seat he would clink with coppers. Even Miss Kingsley's blandishments are of no avail. He treats us as though we were all children committed to his care by the wooden-faced manager, and declines to help us to squander our substance. Miss Kingsley gazes wistfully at her live Murillo, still running in trustful expectation by our wheels. Fear of Carrie's severe rebuke alone keeps her from dropping her half crown into his small brown palm. She is beginning to look positively unhappy, when Jones, stooping over the side of the wagonette, drops to the boy a large silver piece. His great eyes light up with pleasure and gratitude as he stops short and gazes at the unlooked-for possession. With a glad heart, no doubt, he thinks what a welcome addition it will be to the scanty purse at home, what good things it may bring to the meagre larder.

"Now that was good of you," says Muriel, turning to the fortunate Jones with sparkling eyes: "you were more generous than I was. I quite hesitated over this wretched half crown."

It is evident to all that Jones by his kindness to the

boy has scored one, and Brooke grows gray with suppressed envy.

And now we can see where the mountains divide, and where, far off, the famous Gap must be.

A man, riding up to us, asks if we will ascend the narrow pathway on ponies ; but all decline his offer, and declare our intention of doing it on foot.

He is scarcely gone when another man emerges from a hovel on the roadside and lays his hand on the side of our vehicle. He is a most miserable-looking wretch.

"Yer honors will want a man to give ye the echoes," he says, in a low, melancholy voice, barely above a whisper. "I'm the one for ye ; it's meself can give thim in fine style," he says, with a consumptive wheeze.

"To give the echoes?" says Miss Kingsley vaguely.

"To shout until the mountains ring again," I explain pleasantly.

"To shout!" repeats Miss Kingsley, with a glance full of eloquent meaning at the husky man.

"Oh, George, don't get him," entreats Carrie, in a tearful whisper. "He couldn't do it ; he looks as if one good, honest shout would be his death."

Being quite of her opinion—although smitten with regret that I am so, and must therefore decline his services—I inform the melancholy man that we all, both great and small, are of an organization so delicate that the sound of an echo would reduce us to powder. Having thus delivered myself from the shower of abuse that a blunt refusal of his offer would certainly produce, we proceed upon our journey, until we are again stopped by two women, who plainly regard us as legitimate prey, and pounce upon us from a slated cottage as we pass by.

With a request that sounds like a command that we will taste their "mountain dew," they present to us small glasses of goats' milk dashed with whiskey.

"Dhrink it, ma'am, if only for luck's sake," said they to Carrie and Muriel, and, thus adjured, they get through it without any very remarkable grimace. On the whole, it is not a very bad compound.

And now we near the Gap. The road rises and little wooded heights appear. Upon our left tall fir-trees rear their stately heads, one towering above the other as they mount by gradations up the hills, as though bent on dressing them in their stiff, dark greenery. There is a

gleam of silvery rocks among them, a glitter of running water; through the branches a suspicion of pale blue smoke comes from some cottage half hidden.

"It reminds one a little bit of the Tyrol," says Muriel musingly.

And now we come to the spot where the first echo is to be heard, and getting out of our wagonette, we prepare to listen to it. I have forgotten to say that we picked up and engaged another guide with a more promising voice than our first friend, who tells us he has been "giving the echoes" to tourists for the last twenty-four years. He is a wiry-looking little man, with a comical eye and a tongue that refuses rest.

Leaving us now, he moves a few yards from us, facing the mountain, and makes ready for our entertainment. First, he clasps his hands firmly behind his coat-tails, thereby giving them a gentle swing upward, bends his body in two, and finally gives vent to an unearthly screech that makes Carrie (who is unprepared for it) jump. From mountain to mountain this sound flies, as though it were the yell of some imprisoned monster chained in some vast rocky dungeon near us. Five times it is repeated, ever growing fainter and more bitterly wailing, until it dies away among the distant Reeks into an impressive silence. Again our guide lifts up his voice, but this time there comes from him a soft, clear note, tender, loving, melancholy, that floats from hill to hill, making sweet music to the listening ears. Ever softer and softer it becomes, until it too fades away into space. We are all enchanted, and are expressing our delight, when another sound checks us. Mocking laughter seems now to come to us from behind the stern mountains that close us in on every side. It is everywhere: near us, far off, over our heads. We scarce know where to turn for it. "Ha—ha—ha! Ha—ha—ha!" Weird and wild it rings through the air, until at length we begin to feel just a little uncanny. Our guide is openly enchanted with the effect he has produced upon us, and throws in a final shout before taking us further on our way.

But we are not to go yet. A man, who has apparently sprung out of the earth at our approach, proceeds to fire off for our delectation a blunderbuss cannon placed on a projecting piece of ground about eight feet square. For

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the use of this little plot of ground, he tells us, he pays his landlord six pounds a year; so it is to be hoped the tourists who stay to hear his cannon fired pay him liberally. The effect of the little explosion he gives us is really wonderful, and suggests the idea that a short-lived battle has just taken place somewhere behind these massive mountains. Having bidden our cannoneer a kindly adieu, and added somewhat to the "sixpence a shot" charge he has brought against us, we go on up the stony road, and soon arrive at the entrance to the Gap.

CHAPTER VI.

Our guide taking one luncheon-basket in his charge, we arm ourselves with the other things, and, glad to be rid of our tremulous vehicle for a time, leave Con in charge of it, and set out for our walk. The guide goes on in front, whistling "Nora Creina" with immense cheerfulness, while we all follow. Miss Kingsley clings to me, Carrie impounds Jones; the gloomy Brooke in silent majesty brings up the rear.

"Here's the toll-gate, ma'am," says our guide, whose name is Mick Dempsey, turning as we come to two huge bowlders that stand high on each side of our path, facing each other. They really do resemble the pillars of a gateway. "When Finn Mac Conhal cut the mountain in two to make this Gap, ma'am, he put these stones here wid his own hands to guard the way. 'Tis thrue for me, though maybe you won't believe it."

I can see that Carrie is much struck by the guide's words, and would give her little finger to be *able* to believe them.

"There were giants in those days," I whisper to her, in kindly encouragement, as we go on again.

But how to describe the gloomy grandeur of the Gap itself, with its dark, mountainous sides, its sullen lakes, all inky black, the mysterious sound of hidden waters rushing through it? Winding upward, the rugged pathway leads us deeper and deeper into the heart of the mighty mountains that stand serene and awful throughout the ages. High up on the rugged cliffs white specks can be discerned that presently resolve themselves into goats. A sense of utter loneliness falls upon us, born of

the mystic silence that wraps this wild ravine. With unexpressed desire for freedom we look heavenward, to where the broad sky is over all, flushed, exquisite, with its cloud of rose-red melting into tender gray.

Our guide, who is totally unimpressed by the stern beauty of the scene, breaks in upon our thoughts.

"See! there's the Eagle's Nest, ma'am," he says, pointing to a crag that is barely discernible, "an' here, sir, is St. Patrick's Lake—the Black Lough, we call it; and 'tis cowlder and blacker thruly than the others. 'Twas here the saint (may he be good to us!) threw the last sarpint in an' drowndeed him. 'Tis the idintical place, ma'am. In an iron chist he shut him, and flung him into the wather there, below yer foot. An' isn't it quare, ma'am, not a fish will live in it till this day? Herbert o' Muckross an' others have thried it ag'in an' ag'in, an' 'tis all o' no use."

Later on we discover that our guide's statement is true, though it is supposed that some mineral substance, and *not* the "sarpint," is the cause of the fishes' disease. Seeing Carrie's chagrin at this trampling on old legendary lore, I kindly suggest that perhaps it is the iron clasps on the "chist" that have tainted the water ever since. My well-meant remark is received with contemptuous silence.

"You seem to have a regular store of anecdote," I say to Mick Dempsey, turning to him as a more congenial companion than the others: *he* at least will not treat me with open scorn.

"Fegs, I have that same," says he, delighted at my appreciation of his conversational powers. An envious depreciation of *mine* by those who shall be nameless has not soured my naturally perfect temper.

"I could tell ye tales be the hour," says Mick Dempsey, genially, finding in me a kindred spirit. "An' there's a good one I remimber now. Ye niver heard o' Pat Daly, did ye?"

With a sense of growing importance I sadly confess that as yet that illustrious individual is unknown to me.

"Well, he's a guide round here, like myself, an' not bad at the echoes aither, but not as good as me, though I says it as shouldn't. (Mick Dempsey, guide; ye'll recommind me to yer frinds, won't ye, sir?) Well, whin Pat Daly was takin' it upon himself to set up here as

guide, he wint to one o' the ginthry round and axed for a few lines of characther to show to the English tourists that might be comin' this way. The gintleman axed him in turn if he could read, an' Pat towld the truth for once an' said he couldn't. 'That's bad, that's bad,' says the squire; 'but you shall have yer lines, for you're as dacint a man as I know, if a thrifle given to the murdherin' o' yer neighbors.' So Pat got his papers, an' away wid him to the enthrance o' the Gap to wait for the tourers. An,' sure enough, soon there came along a large party o' the English folk, that he knew by the checks on their breeches (saving yer presence, ma'am) an' the die away look o' the ladies. So Pat, wid his paper in his hand, walked up to them as bowld as brass.

"'An' what are you, me good man?' asks the foremost o' the party.

"'A guide, yer honor,' says Pat. 'If ye misthrust me, read this; 'twill spake the thruth of me.'

"So the gintleman squeezed his eye into a glass an' began to read it; an' afther a bit he turned as pale as a turnip, an' 'Good heavens!' says he, and whispered somethin' to the others, an' the womin give a screech, an' away they all wint, like a flock o' sheep, down the path ag'in, the way they had come, an' was niver heard of since. An' Pat was mighty glad to be rid of 'em so aisy, for he thought they was a party of lunatics that had escaped from the asylum up in Killarney. But a second a' third party o' the Saxons behaved jist the same, an' thin it began to grow serious, for Pat was earnin' nothin' at all, an' starvation was beginnin' to be good friends wid him, whin there come along a lot o' studints from Dublin, an' whin they read his lines they all burst out a-laughin' till ye'd think they'd dhrop. They wur Irish, ye see, an' knew a joke whin they saw it. An' prisently, whin they could spake for laughin', they read aloud to him his characther; an' sorra word o' good was there in it at all, but jist a few lines, sayin', For the love o' the Vargin an' the good of his sowl, let no man thrust the bearer o' these lines, for a more thunderin' villain, or a 'cuter robber, or a nater murderer there wasn't in the counthry; an' that though as yet they hadn't been able to bring his crimes home to him the whole Gap was strewn wid the bones o' his

victims! Ha—ha! Fegs, 'tis himself could tell you that story grand, an' how 'the squire who wrote the paper for him nearly choked with potheen and laughter when he heard it all, an' give him a five pun' note to make it up to him. Will I give ye another echo now, here, ma'am? 'tis a mighty good place for one."

Again he bends forward, places his hands behind his coat-tails, and throws them lightly into the air. In this position he resembles nothing so much as a superannuated blackbird. But this time his efforts to call forth an echo fill us with amaze. It becomes apparent to us that a person of the name of "Paddy Blake" lives somewhere in the interstices of the mountains. He is first affectionately, then sternly, then angrily desired to "come out o' that," and when he declines to leave his rocky fastness is accused of all sorts of low misdemeanors, such as of being "drunk and disorderly" overnight, and so forth. I am beginning to feel distinctly grieved for Paddy Blake, when our guide's manner to him undergoes a complete change. "From grave to gay" it goes, and quite a light and airy conversation now enchants the ear.

"Good-morrow, Paddy!" "Are ye at home th' day?" "I hope ye're quite well this mornin'?" "Whin did ye return from France, Paddy Blake?"

Mark the tender solicitude in all these queries.

I cease to grieve for the recipient of so many and marked attentions. And now our guide seems determined to probe him as to whether he ever really was or was *not* in the land of frogs.

"Parly voo Francy, Paddy?" "How was the Mossoos whin ye left?" "Vooly vo dancy, Paddy?"

Which invitation, it may be presumed, Paddy accepts, as he sends no answer to it, and silence, we all know, gives consent. There is indeed to me something insolent in the way Paddy repeats aloud all his friend's questions, without deigning a reply to them or ever volunteering any remark of his own. This thought, however, I confine to my own bosom, with my usual amiability, having always had a lively horror of mischief-makers.

Our guide has now ceased to address the distant Paddy (knowing him, probably, to be executing a private *cancan* in his own home), and is again extracting sweet sounds

from the echoing rocks. His wild, soft cry rises on the wind, only to be repeated more softly and with increasing wildness by the listening hills, while we stand by, charmed and awed by the strange sounds of Nature roused.

A tall, handsome lad, the proprietor of another cannon, comes forward here, and fires it off before we have time to know even what he is going to do. Perhaps our ignorance of his design makes the effect of it even grander. From the heights and hollows a thousand replications of the sound burst forth. From the Purple Mountain to the Reeks and back again the crashing thunder is hurled, until all the dark Gap rings with the grand artillery of the angry rocks. Like distant thunder it dies away, rolling sullenly further and further off, until at last, when it ceases, we fail to understand its death, and believe it has but passed beyond our ears into regions still unknown. As its passionate rage ceases from us, the music of the stream that rushes through the gorge makes itself felt, and brings us back to calmer life with a sigh. It is a stream full of conversation, though somewhat sad, as befits the character of its home. We have scarcely yet been helped by it to a forgetfulness of the late assault upon our nerves, when we become aware of the presence of three barefooted girls standing upon the pathway before us. By this time our party has become a little separated, and Jones has found an opportunity of establishing himself beside Miss Kingsley.

One of the girls, stepping forward, holds out to us some knitted socks.

"Buy thim, sir?" says she, coaxingly. "Ye'll find thim good, for I knitted thim meself. Do now!" Then suddenly her soft, roguish eyes fall on Jones and Muriel. "*You'll* buy 'em, sir?" says she confidently. "Ye ought, ye know, for we've waited a long time for ye."

"For *me?*" says Jones imprudently.

"For you an' your good lady," says she, with a courtesy to Muriel, who turns a lovely crimson. But Jones is plainly enraptured. He declines the socks, but gives the lucky spokeswoman something by which to remember him when he shall be gone.

We are all afraid to look at Brooke. Will he give way to rage before which the late storm among the mountains will pale and sink into insignificance? He at least

is not pale ; he is almost purple with suppressed venom. Why on earth did I ask these two young men to accompany us to-day? What irony lies in the thought that I had suggested to them that they should spend a *happy* day with us in this wild gorge !—Happy !

"What pretty girls those were," says Carrie hurriedly, "but how—how strange !"

"Uncivilized, I am sure you mean ; your kind feeling alone suggests the word 'strange,'" says Brooke in an impossible tone. "They were both rude and uncouth, and evidently very much wanting in penetration. You are right, Mrs. Desmond ; they are an ignorant peasantry. I quite agree with you."

Poor Carrie ! She said nothing of the kind, yet, in his present mood, she is afraid to contradict him.

"He looks so sour that I shouldn't think he'd 'agree' with any one," says Jones in a loud aside to me ; but fortunately no one else hears it. "However, there's no accounting for tastes."

"Poor things, I suppose they *are* ignorant," says Miss Kingsley thoughtfully. "And one can *see* they have no penetration," with a soft, absent look at Brooke, that somehow tells upon that young man and reduces his color to a delicate mauve. "But they are very pretty, aren't they ? and full of life and er—verve, and that."

She may be vague, but she is certainly eminently successful. Brooke's mauve subsides into a still more natural hue, and fear of an explosion disappears, at least for the time being. Carrie makes a light suggestion that is well received by all, and

Sunshine sweeps across our lives again.

And now the Logan Stone is pointed out to us by our loquacious guide. It is a huge bowlder, at least twenty feet in circumference, poised upon another rock, and so perfectly balanced by the devil (according to Dempsey) that it will move with the touch of a child.

"An' now if ye don't mind a little rough walkin,' ma'am, an' as ye are not goin' home be the lake, I'll take ye across the ground a bit, to where ye'll git a grand look at Coom-a-Dhur," says Dempsey, who, like James, has taken a special fancy to Carrie, and addresses her alone when any fresh proposition is to be made.

Carrie expressing a determination to surmount all

difficulties, we quit the main pathway and step lightly, if with difficulty, in Dempsey's wake, over wet stones and scraggy edges of rock uprising from the ground. Stumbling heavily over unseen roots of furze and heather, we manage to reach at last a point that is evidently a favorite with our guide.

"An' don't ye look, now, ma'am, yet awhile," he cries. "Keep yer eyes on yer toes till I bring ye to the right spot. Fegs, I bet 'twill reward ye."

It does. Standing upon a high eminence, we look down below us to where stretches the black valley (or Coom-a-Dhur) in all its perfect beauty. Through it runs a rapid river, small, sullen, but tumultuous, subject to violent floods that inundate its banks and neighboring fields at certain seasons. In the distance are trees, in the further distance a soft view of the Upper Lake. For miles the lonely valley extends, bound in by gray, gaunt mountains—a voiceless, dreary spot lying there silent, motionless, with scarce a touch of life. On the left, far as the eye can see, the gaunt hills rise, casting an everlasting shadow on the sleeping valley—a shadow from which, perchance, its gloomy name has been derived. On the right lies the placid Upper Lake, laughing in the merry sunshine as it coquets lazily with its many fairy isles and dances in its tiny bays.

"You have indeed given us a rare pleasure," says Carrie, turning to the delighted Mick Dempsey.

"What is it like?" asks Miss Kingsley, in a low tone. "What an idea of desolation it gives! And those two or three poor cabins seem only to increase the feeling. It reminds me of something, but I don't know what."

"It is like the valley of the Black Umvolosi in South Africa," says Jones, critically. "There is a wildness about it that suggests the other scene."

"You judge from pictures," asks Carrie, "or from some friend's experience?"

"From my own," says Jones. "I was in Africa during the late war. I happened to be in Natal at the time, and went up the country with Wood's column."

We all feel instinctively that he has risen in the estimation of everyone of us. He has seen a *real* war! He has been probably face to face with dozens of black Zulus.

"And you mean to say you saw an actual battle?"

says Carrie, quite purring over him. I begin to dislike Jones.

"Oh, *do* tell us how they throw their assegais, and if they wear feathers in their hair," says Muriel, bending toward him, her eyes alight. I can see that Brooke is again meditating murder.

"No, there were no feathers," says Jones, laughing; "and they threw their assegais just like this."

We have all laid our walking-canes against the ledge of the rock behind us, and as he speaks Jones carelessly lays hold of one of them.

"But did you really see an encounter, Mr. Jones?" asks Carrie, cautiously, to whom wars and tumults are a never-failing source of interest.

"Oh, yes; several," says Jones, in the airy tone of one who, having seen more than most, thinks nothing of it. To some of those who are listening this tone is offensive.

"Why don't you tell them at once that you got the Victoria Cross for an exploit of special daring?" says Brooke, in a loud but hollow voice, and with a sardonic laugh.

"Because I never tell lies," returns Jones loudly, glaring at his opponent. His emphasis is full of terrible possibilities. Brooke, as one can judge by the lowering of his brow, is calling together all his mental forces to make him a crushing reply, when—Miss Kingsley, as usual, comes to the rescue.

"You haven't shown us how they throw the assegai yet, Mr. Jones," she says sweetly. "Mr. Brooke, come here, close to me, as I am sure he will fling his stick in *that* direction."

"Well, here goes," says Jones. He raises his arm, cane in hand, and precipitates the latter into the Black Valley, far, far below.

"Hold! stop!" cries Brooke, rushing forward. "That was *my* stick—*mine!* What business had *you* with it? Make an ass of yourself and an assegai of your *own* stick, if you like, but spare other people's. Where is it now?"

"Oh, where, and, oh, where is my Highland laddie gone?"

quoth I, the sincerest sympathy in my tone; but nobody seems to believe in me.

"*Your* cane!" says Jones, with a suspicious amount of

astonishment, as it appears to me. "Dear me, dear me! I'm sure I'm awfully sorry. Never mind; take mine instead. Keep it as a memento of one of the happiest days of your existence, eh? Ha—ha!"

Jones is fat, and so is his laugh. It is a rounded laugh, and very infectious. We all join in it, though in bodily terror of the consequences of our untimely mirth.

"How strange that a valley in Ireland should so closely resemble one in Africa!" says Carrie hurriedly, more with the design of preventing Brooke from bringing in a crushing remark than from any surprise at the fact.

"Not more strange than Miss Kingsley's finding a resemblance between the entrance to the Gap and the Tyrol," says Jones. "It merely shows how Nature, like history, repeats itself in the most unlikely places. I believe there is no smallest spot upon the globe that has not its counterpart in some other distant clime."

"'Beautiful words,'" quotes Mr. Brooke, with seething sarcasm. "Perhaps, out of your boundless stores of knowledge, you will kindly give us some little hint or quote to us some brief passage that will enable us to share your belief."

"Let us eat our luncheon first," suggest I peaceably. "Is there anything, Carrie, in those baskets we have been bending under ever since we left Con? or must we conclude that they are filled with stones? If you have attempted to play a trick of that sort upon us it will be a sorry day for you, as, in default of anything better, I feel I shall eat you."

In truth, I am in great haste to allay the pangs of hunger, feeling as if our last meal had been consumed about a week or ten days ago.

"Yes, *I'm* hungry too," says Miss Kingsley, as though surprised at herself, though she is in fact, that most charming of all things, a lovely girl with an honest appetite. I regard her with increasing admiration. She is gowned in a pretty blue serge that fits her lissom figure to perfection, and her eyes are lustrous and gleaming.

Her mouth full small, and thereto soft and red,

is slightly parted as she smiles on our "melancholy Jaques," the forlorn Brooke, with a sweetness that should have melted a heart of stone.

It melts Brooke, certainly, to deeper love, but fails to lift him from his slough of despond. He is so deeply imbedded in its mud that not even Beauty's self has power to raise him.

He regards her with gloomy appreciation. To him it seems

> That as of light the summer sunnë sheen
> Passeth the star, right so over measúre
> She fairer is than any creatúre.

"Yes, luncheon by all means," says Carrie, briskly, and soon we are seated at that pleasantest of all meals, now pleasanter than ever because of its being an *al fresco* arrangement. But we are not allowed to enjoy it properly. The imminent fear of an outbreak between the youths, the many warm reminders that but a treacherous peace is reigning, the badly subdued rancor that bursts out in tiny but deadly flashes now and then, all combine to destroy with ruthless force our vain endeavors to be innocently mirthful. Once I make a praiseworthy, if mistaken, effort to promote good fellowship all round, but Jones having openly declined to see it, and Brooke having "gorgonized me from head to foot with a stony British stare," I give it up, and subside into dull silence and the pie on my left. Perhaps, indeed, to be more correct, the pie subsides into me. It little matters; all is gloom.

The luncheon is irreproachable, the *pâtés* beyond praise, the wine very good, there is not so much as one grain of salt in the cream, or a suspicion of sugar on the chicken, yet, nevertheless, these young men damp all our spirits and crush our rising wit. As a rule, I am an excessively meek member of that meekest of all classes called husbands—there is hardly ever a moment when a child might not in safety play with me—but yet I can be roused. Just now, seeing the havoc these miserable young men are making of our day, I was indignant, and permit my temper to get the better of me.

As we all rise from our impromptu table, I step aside to where Carrie is standing alone and make my assault upon her.

"Now how do you like your young men?" I whisper to her, with true bitterness of soul.

"They are not *my* young men," returns she, with dignity, surveying me from a moral height that dwarfs my

material inches and shatters my nerves. "If they were, I should know at once how to reduce them to order and show them how to conduct themselves."

There is a hidden warning in these words I am not slow to mark—a warning I feel I shall do well not to despise. So, conjuring up the weak shadow of a smile, I tell her I quite agree with her, and relapse into my usual submission. She is graciously pleased to accept my change of mood, and instantly gives way to her own grievance on the same subject.

"It is really too bad," she says. "I do all I can for them, and they are worse than prize-fighters. I'm sure I don't see what is to be the end of it all."

"Jones will be the end of it," say I, in a deep, mysterious tone. "You mark my words, she means to have Jones. It is my secret conviction that she likes him best."

"Nonsense! It is Mr. Brooke, you mean," says Carrie. "He is most devoted to her, and she never repels his attentions. He is most persistent in the way he follows her about, and—and all that sort of thing."

"He may 'go on forever,' like his namesake all but the e," return I steadily, "but I'm positively sure she means *Jones*. Jones has the money you know, and it always counts. There may be 'virtue in an if,' there certainly is virtue in a landed estate. If put to it, I feel I should back Jones."

"I think you would lose you money," says Carrie. "Look at them now!"

To look at them is to see that they are at deadly feud one with the other, while Miss Kingsley, calm and smiling, stands between them, conversing amiably of the weather.

"Of course they are each determined that the other sha'n't walk down the Gap with her," says Carrie, with a sigh. "Dear me! why can't men be reasonable?"

"Women won't let them," say I.

The conversation between Miss Kingsley and the belligerents is growing every moment more and more animated. But presently Jones, turning aside, lifts up his voice and addresses himself to Carrie.

"You were asking me yesterday about the Killarney fern, Mrs. Desmond," he says in a friendly tone; "it seems it is not so impossible to procure, after all.

Brooke says he knows all about it. Tell Mrs. Desmond what you have been saying to us, Brooke."

"Well, I certainly should like to get it," says Carrie, falling easily into this trap. "Can I manage to get it, Mr. Brooke?" Thus questioned, there is nothing left to the wretched Brooke but to step forward and forsake his post of vantage. With the full knowledge upon him that if he turns a deaf ear to Carrie's remark rudeness will be laid to his account, he yet hesitates before quitting Miss Kingsley's side and leaving Jones in full possession of the adored one. Yet how can he answer a woman by yelling to her, when a simple step or two will bring him to her side? Carrie is waiting expectantly. A struggle, sharp but fierce, takes place in the breast of Brooke. Then, with one malignant glance at the adversary who has so artfully drawn him into this difficulty, he comes forward.

A smile lights up the obese features of the ingenuous Jones. Truly, it now seems the day is his own as he turns to Miss Kingsley and suggests their commencing their downward walk. I, for one, do not fail to admire his statesmanlike guile. Yes, I am right: Jones's star is in the ascendant. Brooke is nowhere.

Yet the very next move on Miss Kingsley's part upsets all my preconceived ideas, and compels me to begin my weavings afresh.

"There is always danger in a downward path," she says, with grave demureness. "One should choose a trusty friend as pioneer. *You* are too new an acquaintance for the post—Mr. Desmond," with a touch of coquettish petulance, "as you brought me up this weird old Gap, surely it is your duty to take me down again."

And so as was our order of ascent is our descent—Carrie being again given into Jones's care, Brooke once more in gloomy solitude trudging behind.

"Farewell, sweet Coom-a-Dhur! Farewell, Black Valley?" cries Muriel, turning before we quite lose sight of it to wave a loving hand and waft it a spirit kiss.

"They do say there isn't the like o' it anywhere," says the guide, with exceeding pride. But a touch of sadness has fallen upon us, and no one makes him a reply. Perhaps our silence is sufficiently impressive to satisfy him.

A peasant woman coming our way presently, Carrie

addresses her. I dare say she is a relief from Jones, who has grown glum and taciturn. She is a faded woman, with a huge bag of something or other on her back—probably "praties"—and a black eye.

"You have hurt yourself," says Carrie, regarding the darkened eye with gentle sympathy. "How did it happen?"

"Wisha, I don't know, alanna, but 'tis always knockin' meself about I am," says the woman, in a soft, helpless monotone. "Last night I'd like to kill meself, but I got off wid a bad eye, glory be——"

"It must hurt you, indeed," says Carrie, who is compassionately regardful of the lack of intellect in the expression of the woman's countenance.

"In fegs, but it might be worse too. 'Tis nothin' at all, dear. They do be jokin' me about it up home, an' askin' who give me the black eye; but sure I'm a widdy this many a day, an' there's no one to give it to me at all now, God help me!"

This simple regret is too much for us; we all smile involuntarily.

"Is your husband long dead?" pursues Carrie, when she has frowned us down.

"It seems a long while to me, my lady; I miss him a good deal off an' on. He was a very handy man, an' not too ready wid his fist; but Father Jerry says as how it is the best as is always took."

"You got on well together, then?" says Carrie kindly.

"No that bad, yer honor. Jist in the beginnin' when we was married—that is, for the first nine or ten years, ye'll undherstand—he was the divil an' all when the dhrop was in him; but one night shortly after that, he come home mad dhrunk, an' so loose on his pins I wasn't afraid of him, so I up wid me own fist an' I give him a nudge on the brow wid a nate little pot stick as come handy to me fingers (an' used to be the rung of a sugawn chair the like o' which, honey, ye won't see now), an' it cut him a bit an' dhrew the blood. An' afther that, fegs, he had the greatest respect for me, an' never raised his voice above a whisper when I'd be near. Oh, wirrasthrue the day, but he was the sad loss to me! There wasn't a betther man in all the counthry round."

She looks really distressed, sincerely sorry. "Poor soul!" says Carrie, and squeezes something into her

hand. Then we all push forward again, leaving the disconsolate widow and her mysterious bag behind us.

"What a melancholy mouth that poor peasant had!" says Muriel, after a while.

"A weak one," I suggest humbly.

"Yes, weak," confesses Carrie reluctantly, who has fallen in love with Killarney and its inhabitants, man woman, and child, and resents as a personal affront a word in their disfavor.

"Mouths are so expressive," says Jones—"far more so than the eyes, in spite of all that poets may say."

"Poets say a good deal for mouths too," I remind him amiably. "Even so long ago as in the days of Sir John Suckling they knew what a pretty mouth meant."

"So they did," says Jones enthusiastically. "I remember the quotation to which you allude. It applies to the mouths of to-day as well as to those of the past yesterday." He glances with expressive tenderness at Miss Kingsley, and then repeats, slowly,—

> "Her lips were red, and one was thin:
> Compared with that was next her chin;
> Some bee had stung it newly.

His gaze is waxing positively warm and we are all beginning to criticise with much loving-kindness the quaint old lines, when we are stricken dumb by Brooke. He has broken into a loud discordant laugh.

"What an absurd amount of nonsense is spoken about poetry, *so called!*" he says irreverently, "and how insanely impossible are many of the lines before which we bow down and worship! Just fancy, for example, Miss Kingsley's lip if a bee had 'stung it newly!' Why it would be out of all proportion—like Jones's nose!"

He laughs again wildly. Is there in this rude mirth incipient madness? Jones is looking apoplectic. There is little time to be lost.

"You are right!" I exclaim genially, seeing Carrie is too far gone to be of any use. "The sting of a bee is no joke. It would make the prettiest lip ugly in less than no time, and twice the size of any *ordinary* nose."

"*There! Of course, as usual*, you have said the wrong thing," whispers Carrie, in an agony. "You have as good as said Mr. Jones's nose is twice as large as anybody else's."

"Aren't you pleased, Mr. Jones?" says Muriel, with a little seductive smile, glancing at him from under her long lashes. "You have just been told that my mouth and your nose are as lovely one as the other."

How she has arrived at this reasoning no one knows. Not a soul, however, dares to argue with her or dispute her right to come to any conclusion she may choose. Jones cheers up. His apparent determination to fall upon Brooke and smite him hip and thigh dies away; once more he saunters on with Carrie down the rugged glen.

And now again we pass St. Patrick's Well, and cross the two rustic bridges that span the river rushing so merrily through the lonely Gap—past the turn-pike, past the Eagle's Eyrie, and so on and on, until we come to our starting-point and the faithful Con.

CHAPTER VII.

Our drive home is singularly silent, our dinner marked by a careful reserve. Even the bull-terrier seems struck by the strange quiet that has fallen upon us: probably he regards it as the proverbial calm that preludes the coming storm.

Later on, in the drawing room, Miss Kingsley remains persistently beside Carrie, and refuses to be inveigled from her retreat or drawn into any *tête-à-tête* whatsoever. It is with increasing appreciation of her mental strength I note this power to cope with stratagem. At an early hour she declares herself, with a pretty smile, "so very, *very* tired," and bids us all "good-night." This she does with a slow grace that suits her; and if it seems to me that her hand lingers longest in that of Brooke, the idea it gives rise to is speedily set at naught by the fact that certainly her eyes rest more contentedly on Jones. I am still lost in a maze of doubt as to her real meaning, when Jones himself comes up to me and tucks his arm into mine.

"Will I come out of doors and have a cigar with him before going to bed?"

I'm not such a dullard that I don't know what *that* means—fatuous talk about Miss Kingsley, until, through

sheer weariness, my lids drop over my miserable eyes. But I haven't the courage to refuse, and, with a sigh for my victimized self, I succumb to his fleshy grasp and permit myself to be led from the room.

I am right. Without a preamble, without so much as a decent leading up to the topic, he launches forth into praise of the immaculate Muriel.

"Did you ever meet anyone with such a heavenly temperament?" he says, when he has exhausted a barrowful of endearing epithets upon her personal loveliness. "The way she treated those little ragamuffins we met to-day going to the Gap! Did you notice it? She looked as if she adored them, one and all. I believe she couldn't see that their faces were dirty. That's what *I* call true saintliness of spirit. Her soul was filled with a divine pity for their wretched condition. To me she seems positively faultless."

"There is nothing more admirable than strong belief," remark I sententiously. I throw extra force into my manner, to cover the fact that I am gradually dropping into a state of somnolency.

"There were moments," goes on Jones, clinging affectionately to me, "when I had my doubts as whether I or another (who, in spite of all shall be nameless) had the first claim on her affections. They were weak moments. To-day has solved all doubts. *Now*," says Jones, turning to me with alarming rapidity, and laying his hand with a proud gesture upon his massive breast, "I know that it is I—*I* who am preferred! You think with me?"

I murmur a sympathetic reply. I fully and entirely agree with him. In truth, I see no reason why he should not consider himself first in favor with Miss Kingsley. At the same time, I see no reason, either, why I should not equally agree with Brooke, were he to ask me the same question.

"Yes, yes. She was more than sweet to me all day. *That* fact could not have passed unobserved by anybody." This somewhat viciously. "She's a perfect angel!" goes on Jones, with a rapturous sigh. "She is more than human."

This is just a little too much for me.

"Oh, look here, you know, Jones. I wouldn't, if I were you," I remark, in tones of grave censure. "To

traduce the girl you love isn't form, you know. It—it isn't nice."

"Traduce—traduce!" stutters Jones, growing purple. "Eh? eh?"

"I believe," I return judiciously, "that I just now heard you make a remark to the effect that Miss Kingsley, in your opinion, 'was more than human.' Now, how does the case stand? I am a poor authority, I know, but tell me now, if a person is said to be 'more than human,' may she not be reasonably called *inhuman?*"

This conundrum I propound most anxiously, as one athirst for information.

Jones, I can see in the clear moonlight, is growing as mad as mad can be.

"To be wilfully misunderstood!" he mutters angrily, and presently takes himself off. Thus am I mercifully delivered from a lover's tirade that would probably have lasted, but for my subterfuge, until the stars began to wane.

When I am positively assured that he has gone well out of my sight, I return to Carrie, and suggest a swift departure to our room, so as to avoid a second encounter with him. Being sleepy, she accedes to my request without a murmur.

"Well, I'm quite sure you are wrong about Mr. Jones," she says, as we toil up the stairs. "I am almost certain Muriel intends accepting Mr. Brooke."

"You're wrong, not I," I return, with conviction.

"I'm not," says Carrie.

"You are," say I.

"I believe she hates that poor Mr. Jones," persists Carrie.

"Well, time will tell," exclaim I, feeling further argument beyond me.

"To-night shall tell," says Carrie firmly, and, stopping suddenly in the middle of the corridor, she forsakes my side, and, entering a room upon our left, disappears from view and leaves me go on alone, disconsolate.

Time passes. Evidently it is a more difficult task than she imagined to wring the truth from Muriel. Good heavens! could she have entered the wrong room, and been done to death by an hysterical old maid dreaming of midnight assassins? I am beginning to be suspicious

of foul play, and full of sleepy suggestions to a sluggish conscience, to the effect that I, or the bull terrier, or the wooden-faced manager, should go on a voyage of discovery in search of her remains, when the door opens, and she herself, in the uninjured flesh, appears upon the threshold.

"Well, is it Brooke?" I asked, with some faint wakening into animation and a sharp return from the Land of Nod, into which I have been wandering. I receive no reply.

"Silence gives consent," I remark, with hypocritical hilarity. "I bestow my congratulations and my benison on the fortunate Brooke. Let no false shame hinder him from accepting both. Though their intrinsic value is priceless, they wouldn't, I fear, fetch much."

"Oh, do be quiet!" says Carrie, almost tearfully. There is about her such an air of chagrined surprise as she sinks into the nearest chair that my jocosity slips from me, and, ashamed of my abominable flippancy, I place an arm around her and look unutterable sympathy.

"Go on," I whisper; "tell me what she did say to you."

"Nothing."

"What! After all this time?"

"All what time? I wasn't a moment away."

"I thought it was a year," return I reproachfully, which pleases her, and presently her grievance breaks into sound:

"She would tell me nothing, not a word. When, at first, I just dropped a little hint about Mr. Brooke, she began to laugh, and said she had no idea I was so—'so attracted by him,' and she has laughed ever since. I said I was sure he loved her, and she said 'was I?' I repeated my assurance a little sharply, whereupon she declared it was very good of him, that 'she wasn't worthy of him,' and all that sort of nonsense. Then I came to the point and asked her outright if she didn't believe that he was in love with her. She said, 'Dearest Carrie, you do ask such difficult ones; no one can guess them. Never mind, I'll ask you another instead: Do you think he loves me or hates Mr. Jones the most?' Of course I felt then there was nothing more to be said to her on that head, so I changed

ground and said I should like to see her happy—as happy as I was. I put that in, you know, to give a color to it," says Carrie, as though apologizing to me for having told such a flagrant untruth.

"It was very good of you to go as far as that for me," I return meekly. "It is more than I deserve. What answer did she make to you?"

"She said—you will understand it was nothing but an idle compliment—but she did say," confesses Carrie reluctantly, "that she didn't dare hope to get for a husband such a 'darling' as I had secured."

I was right: Miss Kingsley is a nice girl. I am very glad I asked her to stay with us; it was an excellent thought of mine. She is a remarkably intelligent girl. Outwardly, however, I take no notice of this last proof of her rare intelligence.

"True, true," I murmur modestly.

"Oh, that's all nonsense, you know," says Carrie. "You aren't the only man in the world, by any means." Plainly, her late conversation with that charming Miss Kingsley has ruffled her plumes.

"There was a time, Caroline," I remark, with some austerity, "when I was given to understand that to a certain person, at least, I *was* the only man in the world."

"A time? What time?" says Carrie, frivolously. "And as to your being the last of your species, I'm sure if that were so the world would be a far more desirable place than it is at present."

"Be it so," return I mournfully. "If my halcyon days are flown, I must e'en be resigned. But no cruelty of yours can alter the fact that you are still to me the one *woman* in the world."

"George, what an amount of humbug you can put into one short speech!" says Carrie contemptuously. But I can see that she is delighted with me, and thinks my sentiments above reproach. Having scored, I go back to the original topic.

"So you could get nothing out of her?" I say.

"Nothing beyond unlimited laughter. Perhaps she thinks it unwise to express any sentiment until that stupid Brooke proposes. Of course it is awkward for her."

"I would still bet on Jones," say I. "There is a sol-

idity about Jones, both in his build and his banking-account, that is sure to tell in the long run."

"Isn't it odd," says Carrie thoughtfully, "that, though we have been thrown so entirely with them during the past few days, we yet haven't the faintest notion which of them it is she really prefers?"

"She is a clever girl," remark I, carefully.

"An enigma," says Carrie.

Thus agreed, we retire to rest, at peace with each other and the world—only to rise again next morning. It is astonishing with what forbearance we (who profess to think variety so charming) treat the eternal monotony of nature. We sleep to wake; we wake to sleep again. And if by any chance some lucky thing occurs to break through this routine, instead of being grateful for it we deem ourselves ill used.

CHAPTER VIII.

THERE was a heavy rain last night. All through the evergreens the drops still drip, the flowers are burdened with its spray, yet with the light came sunshine and a zephyr wind and a promise of good things to come.

The little reign of weeping—now past and gone—has left a subduing influence that contrasts warmly with the glowing rays great Phœbus is casting broadly on earth and lake and mountain. The water, as though tired of last night's turbulence, is lying exhausted, swaying gently to and fro, and glinting beneath the sun's hot touch.

"Whither are we bound to-day?" asks Jones, at breakfast, with such a blithe belief in our inability to go away anywhere and leave him behind as puts to flight all courageous determinations to shun him.

"To the Upper Lake, I suppose," says Carrie, kindly.

"Ah! I shall be glad to see that," says Brooke, toying gracefully with his egg and letting an expectant smile steal over his lean countenance. Truly, as it seems, we are in for it.

Not another word is said, but when we—Carrie, Miss Kingsley, and I—saunter down to the boat, it does not surprise any of us to find Brooke and Jones waiting for us.

Past Lamb and Heron Isles we go again, until Ross Castle, with its tower and floating flag (Lord Kenmare, for whose coming the flag has been hoisted, arrived at the castle last night) and ivied bastions and quaint buttresses, comes into view. And then again past "sweet Innisfallen" and Mouse Island to the water beneath Tomies, whose brown plateau lies dark and gleaming in the sunlight. Some sheep are browsing upon the top of the hill; the gable of the cottage shows gray against the dark background; the trees seem full of newer tints.

Still on and on, with James the boatman, smiling on our delight at the beauteous Nature round us, to where Stag and Burnt Island stand together close against the shore, with Tomies towering aloft upon their right and overshadowing them. In the clear-cut sedges with their brown heads large lily-leaves lie broad and flat upon the water, with crimson berries floating in and out between them. Upon a dark-gray stone a heron, most solitary of birds, stands dreaming—a thing as gray as its resting-place.

And so on, through Bricken Bridge, to the Muckross or Middle Lake.

"There's fogs an' storms on these lakes as ye wouldn't believe," says James, addressing himself as usual, to Carrie. "'Twas on'y a fortnight since, ma'am, as I was caught in one o' thim wid a party of the English folk."

The fact that Carrie has sprung from the Emerald Isle is as well known to James, by instinct, as if her pedigree was read to him. It enhances her value and renders her doubly dear in his sight.

"For, fegs, thim English is mighty scarce wid the civil word," says James to me on a later occasion.

"Why they'd think it shame to offer a poor man the full of his dhudheen, an' to give him a chance o' convarsin' wid thim would kill thim intirely. 'Tis aisy to know Mrs. Desmond is one o' the right sort."

"Well, did you get safe home?" asks Carrie, now, seeing he wants to tell her something.

"I didn't thin, indeed, ma'am. The fog came down as thick as a blanket just as we come to Bricken Bridge, so I towld thim 'twould be madness to thry an' find our way home, an' I had to git 'em to go ashore here," pointing to the peninsula that leads from Bricken Bridge to Muckross. "'Twas many a mile they had to walk till

they come to Muckross Gate, an' there we found all in bed, an' the ould woman at the lodge hard enough to rouse. By dint of yellin' an' throwin' stones at her windy I brought her out at last. She opened the shutther an inch or so, an' says she, 'Who's there?' 'A frind,' says I, as bowld as brass. 'A frind? The divil!' says she, screechin' it out like mad. An' would ye believe, ma'am, the ould varmint left us to climb the gates at that hour, swearin' to us all the time she'd report us to Herbert o' Muckross an' git the law of us."

"I hope there won't be a fog to-night," says Carrie, laughing.

"Oh, no, ma'am," says he, with a twinkle in his gray-blue eyes. "They've manners enough, thim fogs, to know when they shouldn't come on."

"'Tis a wonderful land," says Jones to me in a fat whisper.

"There's the Divil's Bit, ma'am," says James—"that great rock there in the middle o' the lake. Ye'll see where he tuk it out o' if ye look up at Torc for a second."

We all glance at beautiful Torc, with its darkly-wooded sides, and mark where, on a part of its topmost ridge, there is a hollow that looks as though a piece had been bitten out.

"'Twas the ould gintleman himself and The O'Donoghue as had a bet on it, ma'am, as to who could carry that stone without droppin' it from Torc to Ross Island. An' the divil said he was equal to it, an' his price for carryin' it was to be The O'Donoghue's sowl, for he'd a great hankerin' afther him; an' though they were the best o' frinds, still The O'Donoghue held his own wid him, an' gave him no chance to git a hoult o' his spirit. Well, The O'Donoghue agreed to risk his sowl, an' the divil in great glee bit the stone out o' the mountain and flew toward Ross. But, fegs, it was too much for him, the ould blagguard, an' half way across the lake it slipped from him and dhropped jist where ye see it now. An' 'twas mighty fine game The O'Donoghue made o' him afther that."

We have crossed the lake by this time and come to Toothache Bridge, which leads from the Middle Lake to The Meeting of the Waters.

"An', indeed, ma'am, an' 'tis no lie for me, once ye

pass undher that bridge ye'll never have toothache ag'in," says James, with solemn belief.

And now we pass under the old Weir Bridge, and enter on the beautiful channel of running water called the Long Range, that leads to the Upper Lake. Shadowed by wild Torc, grand and majestic, we steal down this heavenly stream, our senses filled with the silent beauty of its verdant banks. Here and there on every side rises peak above peak in the great walls of hills that line our way on right and left. There is a strange stillness in the air, a marvellous light on all things, unknown to other lovely scenes. There is no sound anywhere savethe harmonious rippling of the water against the sides of our boat.

And now we are gliding past the Eagle's Nest, a tapering mountain, and James, resting on his oars, sends forth a wild musical cry, that is caught up by a splendid echo and rung through many changes until it dies away into a sobbing silence. Then somebody remembers the "coo-ee" of the Australian colonists, and we call it aloud, and find it has a wonderful effect among these hills; and so we teach it to James, and hope that in the future he will make use of it with other visitors, and so have something of his own to give them unknown to the boatmen round.

Then on again by our wave-girt shore, past fantastic rocks and gleaming water-weeds and wet green grasses, to Coleman's Eye, a promontory, which shows we have come to the end of the Long Range and are entering the Upper Lake.

Of all three lakes surely it is the loveliest, with its fairy isles and grand old mountains, its tranquil, lonely calm, and its glimpse of the Black Valley far away in the distance. Down the sides of the mountains run little rills, pale and bright as silver beneath the sun's hot rays. Tall pine-trees, dark and solemn, crowd to the water's edge; some swans, with proud arched necks and spotless plumage, glide here and there. It is all, in truth, a sight to make glad the heart of man. The arbutus dips to drink, shedding its flowers upon the tiny waves that carry them far from the parent stem. Some red leaves, bright as blood, drift with them. Through banks of brown, crisp, fading fern, tinged with a brilliant crimson, we float past masses of gray rock and

bowlder clad with daintiest moss, whilst James descants aloud to us on the beauties of the islands we go by—the Arbutus, the Oak, and Juniper Isles, clad with their namesakes, and the Eagle Island, so called because there are no eagles on it.

"Well, there used to be," says Carrie indignantly, who is full of faith.

Then Romayne's Island, where, James assures us, some lunatic who passed for sane once lived for many years. Why, or for what deponent sayeth not, but I have dark dreams of a mother-in-law as we steal slowly past it.

MacCarthy More's Island is the last we come to. On it the cedars of Lebanon flourish and grow green and throw their branches far and wide. Carrie grows very High Church again as she hears this, and Miss Kingsley says, "It is interesting."

It is a scene so satisfying, so entirely without a flaw, that I feel I should go to sleep but for the pangs of hunger that have assailed me. Landing on one of the islands, we proceed to the cold pies and chicken without further delay. It is a sultry day; not even the water in a shady nook into which we have plunged it, makes the champagne cool; but, nevertheless, we are grateful for it. We have suggested to James that the water out of this same nook will be the coldest to mix with his whiskey; but he being of opinion that water spoils that liquor, we leave him to his own devices.

"Thank ye, ma'am!" says he. He always steadily ignores any one but Carrie. "You've brought us an uncommon good lunch (ye'll see how I pick up yer own words, ha! ha!), an' we're obliged to ye, but if ye'll lave us the whiskey nate, I think 'twill be more agreeable to us."

This settles the question.

When luncheon is at an end, we all rise with one accord and suggest a tour of the small isle on which we have dared to land.

"Oh that there might be hope of savages!" says Carrie with enthusiasm.

However, in spite of her prayer, we meet nothing, and finally reach a tiny bay surrounded by gray rocks, on one of which we come to a stand-still.

"How quite too utterly sweet!" says Jones, who has

a mad hankering after the new religion of art. "Mark its depths, its possibilities, its——"

"Mark Muriel's glove!" cries Carrie suddenly.

It has floated away, slowly, inconsiderately, just out of reach. She had been leaning over the huge rock that lies close to the water's bosom, and it had slipped from her and become part of the flotsam and jetsam of the sparkling lake. We had indeed been all stooping over the shelving rock when this catastrophe occurred, watching the water-grasses swaying to and fro.

As the glove is seen drifting away we all start into life, there is instant concern on the part of everybody. Regardless of our anxiety, however, it floats slowly further and further from us. Somebody surely ought to catch it.

I am conscious of a deep sense of gratitude as I remember I am no longer a gay bachelor, and that, therefore, it is not my duty to come to the relief of fair damsels in distress. That pleasant duty devolves upon Brooke and Jones. Hoping they like it, I stand at a respectful distance and watch their proceedings with a keen interest.

Brooke has flung himself upon his face and hands, and is projecting his body in a most dangerous fashion over the edge of rock in a futile attempt to recover the lost treasure. Every moment I expect to see his heels in the air, his head out of sight, so uncertain is his position. He seems wildly bent on the recovery of the glove, which in a tantalizing way bobs here and there, but never within reach. Now nigh, now far, now almost within his grasp, it dances, but yet not near enough to surrender itself a prisoner.

In his endeavors to reach it Brooke is growing unpleasantly red. I begin an elaborate speculation as to whether it will be victory with him or death from disease of the heart, when a move on the part of Jones upsets my thoughts. He has not been idle. He has rushed into the woods behind us on Carrie's first cry, and now emerges from it armed with a huge crooked stick denuded of branches, which he waves aloft.

"This will do," he pants huskily.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, indeed, not the least bit," says Miss Kingsley earnestly. "I wish you would both forget all about that wretched glove."

But it is too late for directions emanating even from the beloved. Jones in turn prostrates himself upon his stomach, and, thrusting out his forked stick, proceeds to dibble for the glove.

Delicately, in a coaxing manner, he pats the water near where the desired object sways gently up and down.

"There is something coaxing about Jones, after all," I whisper to Carrie, as we both stand together watching the comedy that is being enacted so close to us.

"Take care it doesn't turn into a tragedy," says Carrie solemnly. "I mistrust those two young men."

It is plain to everybody that they mistrust each other. Fire flashes from their eyes as they regard each other with glances of deadly hatred. Then Jones makes his final effort. It is the moment in which victory seems nearest to Brooke. Almost he is assured of it. His fingers have all but closed upon the coveted glove, when Jones' seductive tap upon the waters shakes the advancing wavelet that bears it on its crest toward Brooke, and—oh! maddening thought—changes its course and bears it straight to Jones.

Is he, then, to be the Sir Francis that is again, in modern days, to rescue his lady's glove? Perish the vile thought!

Wild with jealous fear, Brooke stoops still further over the shelving rock, and makes a movement of his hand in the water meant to imitate and spoil the effect produced by Jones's rod. Alas! it only serves to drive the glove still nearer to that demon. His brow grows black as thunder: the game is slipping from him. Jones, with a fiendish laugh, stoops over and makes ready to seize the skin of contention. Further, further still he stoops. The prize is his! He flings away the faithful stick that has done him such good service without so much as a grateful glance, and bends to secure the glove.

Just a little too far he bends; he loses his balance; he makes a convulsive clutch at his prey. Then there is one awful moment, when his heels attain an unenviable notoriety and his head sinks into the watery abyss, and the world knows him no more! He has vanished from our horrified sight, perchance, who knows? never to rise again!

He does, however. In a most inconsiderately short time, and with a startling amount of very unromantic

spluttering and puffing and choking he comes to the surface, strikes for land, and is soon hauled ashore by me. In doing him this service I get extremely wet. I should, of course, have avoided the doing of it if possible, but I felt assured that if the task were left to Brooke the man would be most surely drowned. To avoid, therefore, an inquest on the morrow, and to save Brooke's soul from the stain of blood, I lend a helping hand to the dripping Jones.

Oh, the satisfied malice that gleams in Brooke's eye as his rival emerges in doleful plight from the bosom of the lake! Oh, the curl of his lip, the undisguised satisfaction in the tip of his long, lean nose!

"I have got it!" cried Jones with unsubdued delight, as he clambers up the shelving rock with my assistance, Miss Kingsley's glove between his teeth. He looks like a fat retriever, but no one can doubt his pluck. He has forgotten his ducking, his deplorable situation—all save the fact that he is victor. He proceeds to lay his trophy at his lady's feet.

"Indeed I think you might be allowed to keep it for your prowess!" I exclaim enthusiastically, in spite of the water that has run up my sleeves and saturated my cuffs. I feel, as I look at the author of these discomforts, that I am in truth returning good for evil.

"If it were worth keeping," says Miss Kingsley with pretty hesitation, bestowing a smile upon her shivering knight; "but it is such a horrid, wet thing, and——"

"I may keep it, then?" says Jones rapturously, stuffing the clammy glove into the bosom of his dripping shirt. He is overwhelmed with delight. Gratitude beams on his shining face and trembles in his dank locks, as he turns his gaze on me. I have been the benefactor of my species as typified by Jones. He bows down to me. I feel I have made him my friend for life.

I glow beneath the conscious virtue of a kind act performed. Even as I glow I glance at Brooke. Instantly my face falls. Good heavens! what have I done? I have made him my enemy. This is a fearsome thought, as sad experience has taught me that a friend means but little, an enemy much. I lose myself in mournful reflections.

When I return to a sense of surrounding objects, I become aware that Jones has disappeared—probably with a view to wringing his nether garments before start-

ing homeward—and that Brooke and Miss Kingsley are sitting together on a moss-grown rock. Carrie is out of sight (not with Jones, I trust), and I am tolerably so too, because of the huge tree against which I have leaned during my late abstraction.

A few words of the dialogue carried on within a yard or so of me float lightly on the zephyr wind to where I am standing.

"It was a most treacherous act," says Brooke, "and worthy of him who committed it. In all fairness that glove was really mine."

"Poor glove!" says Muriel, lightly. "It was not worth all the trouble it gave. The idea of risking your lives for the sake of a soiled bit of suède! It was too foolish of you both."

"It wasn't for the glove we risked our lives, or rather the chance of a wetting," says Brooke, growing sentimental. "You must know that."

"Indeed I do not. I saw only a glove, for which," reproachfully, "you both fought as though you were two school-boys. Do you know, Mr. Brooke," very sweetly, "if I could be angry with you, it would be now."

Can it be possible she means Brooke, after all? Is Carrie to have this crow over me?

"It was for something far dearer than the glove we strove," declares Brooke, growing almost lachrymose in his increasing emotion. "Oh that I might dare to say more plainly what I mean!"

"You are as plain as possible," says Miss Kingsley, with a kindly air of encouragement. "I quite understand. But it is rather wrong of you, you know. To encourage such rancorous feelings in your breast is very wicked. Yet somehow," turning up eyes innocent as a dove's to his, "I can sympathize with you. It is 'something far dearer' than the mere rescue of a glove to gain a victory over one's enemy. Though why you should call poor Mr. Jones your enemy——"

"That isn't it, at all. You have taken quite a wrong view of my words," says Brooke eagerly. "That wasn't what I meant——"

"Yes, that was quite what you meant," interrupts she, smilingly, but in a tone that prevents his pursuing the subject. "And I don't wonder at your not 'daring' to

say it to me. Let us forget it, however; that stupid glove is to be blamed for it all."

"That priceless glove!" says Brooke, who really seems to me to be going it to-day, and no mistake. "How could you"—tearfully again—"have given it to Jones? But he sha'n't keep it, I am resolved on that."

"Tut! let him have it," says Miss Kingsley. "After all"—in a low, soft, dreamy voice—"a glove doesn't count for much, does it, unless the—hand is in it?"

Is this coquetry, or a mere laudable desire to prevent "battle, murder, and sudden death" on our homeward way? The voice of Carrie, coming from the small landing-place, compels my instant retreat from my present position, and my reappearance again in a moment or so from a totally opposite direction.

"Where is the whiskey, George?" cries she. "Poor Mr. Jones is shivering terribly. He ought to be made to drink something, to prevent him from catching his death of cold."

"Oh, yes, indeed!" says Muriel, earnestly, as we all come up to the boat, where James has covered our wet friend with an old oil-skin coat that may be useful but is hardly ornamental. Out of its voluminous folds Jones looks at us, blue but heroic.

"I'm—all—right!" he declares, with a determination to die game, but giving each word seven or eight syllables in spite of—or rather with the full concurrence of—his teeth, which are distinguishing themselves as castanets of a very high order.

He takes his whiskey with a thankful eye, however; and James takes some, to keep him company, and says "Shlointh-a-houth!" to Carrie, which means, in Irish, "Good health to you!" and throws the one or two drops he leaves in his glass over his left shoulder into the lake, for "good luck's sake."

And now home, with all speed, because of our shivering friend. Across the lovely lake we go to the Long Range again, which seems impossible to find, so curiously are the rocks arranged about its opening.

It has grown to evening now, and a sense of coming twilight is in all the air, and with it that touch of silence that ever belongs to it. Sleepily, yet swiftly, we creep along between the giant hills, not speaking, but enjoying, in a rapturous reverie, the fair feast Nature

has prepared for us. The very boatmen have grown silent; the oars make but a bare murmur as they break the water. A stillness that is almost oppressive has fallen upon us.

And then, lo! a flapping of huge wings, and slowly, slowly, a heron rises from among the gay bowlders on our left, and sails away from us in haughty, dignified fashion.

"Pretty thing!" says Muriel. "Did you see with what contempt he glanced at us over his great gray wing? He reminded me of some Spanish grandee, some old hidalgo, with his solemn movements and his unconquerable pride."

Her voice has broken in part the rather melancholy spell that was holding us. In a subdued fashion James begins to croon some wild old Irish ballad, and we feel that his voice, with the song's monotonous refrain, chimes in well with the gray quiet of the evening.

And now the current increases in rapidity, the water's chant grows louder, and the old Weir Bridge is again in sight.

"Sit steady now, ma'am!" cries James. The men take a keen glance ahead, the oars flash through the water. Nearer we come to the arch, and still nearer; the water seems to foam and rush. There is a last strong pull, the boatmen ship their oars, and with an exquisite little touch of excitement we shoot the rapid and find ourselves in the tranquil waters beyond.

Then under Toothache Bridge we pass, into the Middle Lake, and, crossing it, row under Brickeen Bridge, into the Lower Lake, and so we feel we are indeed close to the end of our day's journey.

"I am sorry when I think of that," says Carrie, with a sigh—"if it weren't, that is, for Mr. Jones——"

"I'm as comfortable as possible," squeaks Jones, with unexhausted amiability, though he is now as hoarse as a raven.

All over Glena Bay lies a soft mist, like a silken veil; from the wooden heights of Tomies comes to us the plaintive bellowing of the deer, inexpressibly lonely, inexpressibly sweet. Behind us looms Torc, dark with shadows of the coming night, though above it the heaven is still bright with glorious day, and on its topmost peak lingers a mass of low, soft cloud, white, trailing,

fleecy—like a descending train of silvery angels come once again to gladden the sad earth. All down the slopes this fair and holy vision comes, melting as we watch it, and sinking at last into the arms of the placid lake beneath.

And now there comes a strange little rush of wind across the water, and a sudden sighing, and a quick and angry moan as if from the fir-trees yonder. The pale-pink sky fades into sullen gray, that brightens momentarily, and then dulls again into a dying blue. Purple-black against this wild background rises Tomies, grand and stately.

"Alas! where are all our angels now?" says Carrie, glancing in dismay at the changed face of heaven.

"There'll be a little squall, I'm thinkin'," says James.

And he is right. The pale, tiny wavelets rise and turn to a dark, angry color; white horses ride abroad; upon the water's crest small flecks of foam are dancing gayly. Our boat begins to rock a little, and Carrie glances at James.

"'Tis on'y the ups and downs o' life, ma'am," says he cheerfully—"jist like the little babies in the cradle. See how young they begin their throubles, the crathurs."

We conclude by this that he believes infants have a rooted objection to being rocked, in which opinion he is as likely to be right as wrong, as nobody knows anything about it, though each one we meet must be a high authority if only he could remember. And now comes down the rain in gleaming torrents—not hard or pelting, but with a soft passionate vehemence. Through it the clouds on Tomies shine sullenly, and as though they were great fumes of smoke rising from dense, unfathomable depths. They seem to wrap the mountain and wind it in a trembling but deadly embrace. Just through this cloudy mist one can see, here and there, a peak or hilly outline, struggling as it were for freedom.

"It is like a scene from Dante's 'Inferno,'" says Muriel, in a low tone. "Poor Doré! could he but have seen this!"

The water-fowls are cudding along the edges of the lake. The short, high waves are dashing themselves against our boat. Darkness has fallen upon us. Past the wave-worn stones of Stag and Burnt Islands we go,

seeing little now but the gaunt outlines of their rocky sides as we steal by them. All are silent except James, who every now and then gives way to a monotonous murmur.

"She was a good boat, she was," repeats he, in a coaxing tone, over and over again. Catching Carrie's look of large amazement, he condescends to explain this remarkable utterance.

"Sure, ye know, she wouldn't carry us so quick through this weather, ma'am, if we didn't give her the good word now an' thin," he says earnestly. "An' it is a good-hearted lass she is at all times, and many's the day she's brought me safe an' sound to land whin another one's gone to the bottom."

"There isn't any real danger, is there?" asks Carrie, with all the calm bravery of one who feels her last hour is close at hand, yet shrinks not.

"Arrah! not at all, ma'am, not a taste of it," says James. "Ye should see the storms we have here sometimes, an' thin ye'd know the differ betwixt thim an' a little squaleen like this."

"Why, the rain is over!" says Muriel, throwing back the covering from her head, and glancing upward at the sky. Carrie, who is distinctly disappointed that danger is far from us, follows her example. Through the last flying drops of rain and the sighing wind a strange, uncertain light is struggling to assert itself. It is the Queen of Night herself that now breaks forth upon our startled vision, glad, solemn, and triumphant.

"How like a queen comes forth the lovely moon
From the slow-opening curtains of the clouds,
Walking in beauty to her midnight throne!
The stars are veiled in light;
All height, depth, wildness, grandeur, gloam below,
Touched by thy smile, lone moon, in one wild splendor glow."

The sullen mist has cleared away. Tomies again stands out bold and grand against the starry sky; upon its topmost heights great patches of moonlight are falling. Across the lake a pathway as of molten silver is laid down that seems to lead from us to Ross Island. The tall fir-trees and swaying beeches and drooping arbutus on all the islands and on the mountain-slopes are tinged with the rays of heaven. Even the waves,

that are still dancing roughly, have their angry crests fringed with the pale fire. The lake, the hills, the starry sky, all combine to create a picture rich in beauty. The men have rested for a moment to gaze at this unexpected coming of the moon—that "goddess excellently bright."

"I think, ma'am," says James, with slow emphasis, "that the Almighty must have taken great credit to Himself when He had finished this place."

The words of the simple boatman, coming so clearly from his heart, seem to us worthy of all admiration and fill Carrie's appreciative soul with joy. Miss Kingsley bends upon him so sweet a smile that Brooke is devoured with envy, and even Jones turns in his mackintosh with a dreary groan. Alas! if such good things be going, why, why is an unimportant boatman to be the recipient of them?

"What a beautiful night it is!" says Brooke, in an insufferably dull tone. This common-place remark is rather too much for us, who have our senses saturated with the unutterable ecstasy that thrills through the air, rising from the blended charms of mountain, lake, and sky. In our exalted mood his trite remark is received as a deliberate insult. If he had hoped by it to bring Miss Kingsley's lovely eyes upon him he more than succeeds, because he brings upon him, too, a swift glance from her of withering contempt. No, it is not Brooke! I feel I shall yet triumph over Carrie, and half make up my mind what wedding-present I shall make Jones.

He (Jones) is plainly enchanted with Brooke's attempt at pleasing converse.

"Go it, Brooke!" he chuckles, in a hoarse croak that ends in a fit of sneezing.

Brooke disdains to hear him. Not yet warned by the marked silence that met his last effort, he now strives afresh to make himself heard.

"What a glorious moon!" he says, throwing up his chin, and regarding the shining planet with quite a kindly admiration. "There are few things that strike one as being so thoroughly replete with beauty as a full moon. She is indeed a goddess supremely regal in her stateliness." And then he begins to spout—

"'Queen and huntress, chaste and fair!'"

He makes his worn-out quotation with a gentlemanly, well-bred air, full of calm sentiment, and looks round for our admiring sympathy.

"Who chased her?" asked I anxiously, in the innocence of my heart.

I get no reply. A stern glance from Carrie and a stony silence on the part of the others compel me to believe I have been—unintentionally—indiscreet. As usual, I am misunderstood. One cannot always remember that those Greek gods and goddesses had histories that—that "really are, you know." And yet, perhaps, I am not so wholly misunderstood as I imagined. There is a prolonged but suppressed sound, and a mysterious shaking beneath the mackintosh that attracts my attention. Has Jones been suddenly attacked by an acute fit of ague? or is it——

And now we have passed the honey-combed rocks, and those they have named the London Press, and have left Innisfallen, too, behind us. The waves are dashing against the Prison as we pass it, trying in vain to conquer its solidity. The men bend to their oars. Straight upon the moonlight watery path we go, until at last we touch land, and soon find ourselves within the hall of the hotel.

CHAPTER IX.

It occurs to me, as we sit at our rather late dinner, that Miss Kingsley's appearance to-night is more than ordinarily festive. It is something in her gown, I think (which is, as usual, white,) or else in her broad, soft sash, which is of an æsthetic green—olive-green—which fact I evolve from Carrie. She has a tiny string of pearls around her neck, and a little sweet-scented rose in her hair. Jones, who, though still hoarse, is well to the front, cannot take his eyes off her, and Brooke grows drowsy with admiration.

Then dinner comes to an end, and I am sitting outside the hall door enjoying a well-earned cigar after the trying events of the day, when a most complicated note from Carrie is handed to me by the bull-terrier. "I am to go to her directly! She awaits me in my dressing-room. It is all very abominable and distressing. I am

not to stay and finish my odious cigar, but to hasten to her."

What on earth is the matter now? I fling away the unoffending weed and race at the top of my speed to my dressing-room, expecting to behold Carrie in *extremis.*

She is, however, walking briskly up and down the room, looking tearful, but in no wise at the last gasp.

"Oh, it is dreadful!" she says. "He came to me just now, as white as a ghost and almost in tears. He said dreadful things. And what could I say? I'm afraid she likes the other the best."

"So am I." (She is beginning evidently to agree with my Jones theory.)

"I never saw anything so forlorn as he looked. He—he looked positively suicidal!" she says hysterically. "I shouldn't wonder at anything he might do."

"He always looks like an escaped lunatic," I remark. "Probably he will do something worthy of note in the years to come."

"He'll do it now!" says Carrie, with nervous solemnity. "He threatened as much. He said things had come to a crisis, and that matters should be decided now, 'at once and for all.' It didn't seem to me at the moment that I understood what he meant, but I believe he is going to challenge his rival. There will be a duel. Good heavens! what is to be done?"

"What, indeed?" say I.

"Oh, what an answer to make to me, when I feel half distracted!" says Carrie, with wild reproach. "Can't you suggest something? Oh, what a man to marry!"

Here she falls a-weeping. I confess with terrible self-contempt that even now, when marriage is an old tale to me, Carrie's tears fill me with despair.

"Don't do that!" I cry. "Don't you know there isn't a bit of good to be got out of tears? There isn't indeed, if you will only look at it in the right light."

"I asked him," says Carrie, still sobbing, "if she had ever given him cause to hope. But he said 'yes' and 'no' so often and so indiscriminately that I couldn't make out what he meant. But how she could prefer the other is more than I can explain."

"Well, I don't know," I say slowly, thinking of Jones's good humor (when away from Brooke), which ought in

a measure to make up for the build of his nose. "He might, perhaps, be regarded by some girls in a more favorable light than the other; but yet there is something, as you suggest, about——"

"Yes; isn't there?" says Carrie, with enthusiasm. "I, for my part, should not dream of comparing them."

"Neither should I," with emphasis, feeling she is growing hard on poor Jones. "One is a consummate puppy, the other——"

"Just so," says Carrie hastily, with a view, as I imagine, to shutting me up. "Oh, if you had seen his face!"

"I don't want to see it," I remark sulkily. "I've seen considerably too much of it. It is as ill-favored a countenance as I know."

"There's a great deal of good in it."

"There's a great deal of bad in it."

"I don't agree with you at all. And it is impossible, George, to know on what side you really are; you seem to chop and change with every wind."

"The whole thing is not worth one unkind word from you to me or *vice versâ*," I remark calmly. "The question is about Miss Kingsley. We have failed to fathom her meaning, though the intentions of these most mistaken young men are only too clear to us. And, after all, I suppose it does make a difference to a girl whether a man is tall or short."

"Of course; yet it can't be everything, you know."

"Neverthless, height counts."

"No, it doesn't!" says she vehemently

Now, I am at the very least six feet one in height, and always up to this believed myself the dearer to Carrie because of my many inches. I am therefore very naturally offended by this remark. It is, besides, a most gratuitous insult, as Brooke is of a goodly height himself, and therefore her pretended indifference to the advantages to be gained by his dignified stature over the somewhat innumerous inches of Jones is put forward merely for my annoyance.

"If you mean to tell me you honestly believe," I begin hotly, "that a girl would prefer as a lover a little, fat, squat man, I——"

"Oh, George! And I thought Mr. Jones was your friend!"

"So he is. But there's justice in all things, and I

wonder you aren't ashamed to mention Jones's name when you are supporting that fellow against him."

"What fellow?"

"Brooke."

"Mr. Brooke! Nonsense!" says Carrie. "I can't bear him. He is"—with airy fickleness—"quite the most insurportable young man I ever met in my life. He is quite too much for anybody, with his absurd airs and graces; but Mr. Jones——"

"You mean to tell me that all this time you have been advocating the cause of Jones?" I ask, with a little gasp of intense surprise.

"Of course I have. Poor fellow! he is in quite a dreadful state."

"I should have thought his cold bath might have damped his ardor," say I grimly.

"It hasn't, then; he seems terribly in earnest. He left me," says Carrie, growing terrified again, "with the declared determination that the night should not pass without his obtaining satisfaction. Oh, George, when men talk of 'satisfaction' they always mean bullets, don't they, now?"

"Do they?" say I.

"You needn't think to hide it from me," says Carrie tearfully. "I can see through you quite plainly. Like myself, you dread the worst."

"Well, let us go down-stairs and face it," I return.

We go down-stairs. In the drawing-room we find Muriel alone; all the other occupants of the hotel seem to be—well, anywhere you like but here. As we open the door, she looks up with a quick, expectant glance and a swift rush of color, that dies away as her eyes encounter ours. Was it Jones, was it Brooke, she was expecting? At all events, it is plain to us that the fact that it is only we is a disappointment to her.

We have hardly time to speculate on this fact, when the door is once more thrown rudely open, and in come—or rather rush—Jones and Brooke. With one accord they dash up the room and toward Miss Kingsley. Fell determination shines within their eyes, so does raging anger. Are they going to precipitate themselves upon her bodily, and rend her limb from limb, as a means of ending, once for all, the mad rivalry between them? Is this "the worst" of which Carrie spoke just now?

An instant later I am convinced that her annihilation is not so much their object as a settled determination to make her come to the point and decide between them.

> "They come, they come, with their flashing eyes,
> And their cheek of passions hue!"

And very unlimited cheek, too, as it seems to me. An absorbing fear that the other may speak before him fills the breast of each. At last they have reached her.

"Miss Kingsley!" says Brooke, in a tone suggestive of hard running.

"Miss Kingsley!" pants Jones, in a tone suggestive of apoplexy.

Evidently the supreme moment has come.

But how is it with Miss Kingsley now in this important hour, when the last act of the drama is being played? What is she looking at down there at the lower end of the room, where the lamp-light scarcely penetrates? Her glance has travelled past the belligerents—it is indeed even possible that she does not see them—to something that is standing in the doorway. This something presently resolves itself into a tall young man clad in light tweed. With a little impassioned gesture she waves aside the breathless Jones and Brooke and advances toward this apparition. Oh, the light that springs into her lovely eyes as she does this, the glad sweetness of her lips!

"You, Cyril!" she says, and no more; but her hands are now imprisoned within his, and there is a ring in her voice that to us is new—such a soft, tender, lingering delight is in it. As for the tall young man, he seems beyond speech, and simply stands staring at her, in a fashion suggestive of the idea that if cannibalism were not now considered vulgar he would willingly devour her.

Then sanity is restored to them.

"Carrie," she says, turning prettily toward us, though with one hand still considerately left to the tall young man, who I am convinced could never have got on without it—"Carrie, let me introduce to you Cyril, Captain Fitzgerald."

Before she has finished this small speech her happy eyes have again returned to her lover. Her lover!

What lover? Which lover? We seem all in a maze; we mutter something that afterward we hope was polite, and Carrie finds her hand is grasped in a very friendly and fleshly manner by the apparition. When I say "we," you will understand that I allude solely to myself and Carrie, as I am too much afraid of them to be able to look at either Jones or Brooke, to discover how they are bearing up under this astounding surprise.

"This, Cyril, is one of my dearest friends," says Muriel, indicating Carrie. "And this is another," with a smile at me—"Mr. Desmond, Captain Fitzgerald."

It is clear that any friend of this girl's must at once be regarded with affection by the tall young man. He wrings my hand warmly, and gives me as long and as kindly a glance as he can spare from Muriel. Indeed, it would be impossible for the very densest person not to see how it is between him and her. A shudder passes over me when I think of Brooke and Jones. Is there not danger in the deadly silence that has fallen upon them? Is it paralysis, or a tigerish gathering of themselves together for a spring?

"Now, I am glad we are all friends," says Muriel, with the sweetest grace. There is something about her beauty at this moment that might well be termed exquisite. Then she turns again to him, and says, with an impulsiveness I could hardly have believed possible in the calm girl of the past few days, "What a time it has been! I thought you would never come!"

"I thought so too," says he simply. "When was it we were last together? It seems an eternity ago. This was certainly the longest month I ever put in in my life."

"But it is over now," says she, and large tears rise in her eyes.

They are speaking quite openly, quite naturally to each other. We are forgotten. It is plain to us that in all the world just now there is only she for him, and he for her.

But where are Jones and Brooke? Stealthily I turn a reluctant eye upon them. They are standing huddled together in a corner, as it were, gaping with lack-lustre eyes upon their undoer. All their fire has died out of them; they are as crushed, as forlorn as a heap of ashes. They look ready to slink away and hide their discomfiture in

some dark spot; but even this poor consolation is denied them; they are bound to face publicity.

"These are two other friends of mine," says Muriel, turning eagerly to them in her new happiness, lest they should deem themselves forgotten. Alas! could she but know it, that is all their desire. "They have been kinder to me than I can say." Then she introduces them to the fortunate, smiling Cyril, and the wretched young men have to come forward and make him a gracious bow, while she looks on with quite a new friendly smile for them upon her lips. "If—if I had been their sister," she says, with a soft touch of effusive gratitude, "they could not have shown me greater attention."

She positively beams upon them. It is all too much for the poor youths. Instinctively in their anguish they turn to each other. In this terrible moment all the fresh wrongs are forgiven, nothing is remembered but the good old days when they were schoolboys together, and those later days when they were chums at Cambridge. They move a little closer to each other. Was it for this false fair one they surrendered a life-long friendship? A little nearer still they draw, and Brooke (who is by far the limpest of the two, and therefore the one upon whom grief—that is, chagrin—has taken the strongest hold), turns to Jones, and gazes on him with a dreary eye, out of which all rancor has flown.

With such an eye does Jones return his glance, and then Brooke totters forward. He slips his hand within Jones's arm; there is a momentary hesitation, and then Jones accepts the situation, the arm, and the unspoken apology, and with faltering footsteps takes his recovered friend and himself out of the room.

CHAPTER X.

"Well, I was amazed, weren't you?" says Carrie, when we are, a little later on, in our own room. "After all, you know, the very silliest person could have seen she didn't mean to have anything to do with those two foolish young men."

"You saw it quite plainly," says I, unable to restrain a passing remembrance of her spoken conviction that Brooke would be the man.

"So did you," says she, with a steady glance that at once reduces me to order. "You were quite certain she wouldn't look at Mr. Jones. I think I have heard you say so a thousand times."

"Oh, make it half a dozen," say I meekly. "I can't encourage exaggeration, even when it is on my side."

Then something strikes us both, and we laugh aloud.

"Didn't she take us in?" says Carrie, in whisper. "Well, after all, there is comfort in the thought that we were both sold. I should never have forgiven you if I had been the only one so utterly at fault."

"I think I like her captain," say I. "There was something honest in the grasp of his hand. And isn't she in love with him, though? Did you mark her eyes?"

"It was all like a charming little scene out of something," says Carrie amiably, "everything seemed to fit in so nicely. Yes, he is very handsome, and somehow suits her. And, in spite of those melancholy young men, what a lovely time we have had during these last few days!"

"What a pity we are bound to leave to-morrow!"

"It can't be helped, and, at all events, we must take Muriel back to her aunt."

"Shall we go by the early or the mid-day train?"

"If we could be only sure," says Carrie, in a disturbed whisper, "when they are going. I wouldn't meet them again for anything you could offer. How shall we find out their movements?"

At this moment there is a tramping noise in the corridor outside, and a stifled voice, that we yet know to belong to Brooke, is heard calling wildly for a waiter. We hold our breaths to listen, and presently the bull-terrier appears upon the scene outside.

"Mr. Jones and I leave by the earliest train," says Brooke, in a stern tone. "You understand, the very earliest—at cockcrow, if possible. We—we have a most important reason for leaving as soon as we possibly can."

"All right, sir. I'll see to it," says the bull-terrier, with an amount of sympathy in his voice that convinces us he knows all about it. It would be a gigantic intellect indeed that succeeded in hiding its private affairs from the ken of a servant.

"That's all right," says Carrie, in a relieved tone.

"Then we go by the mid-day train, which is of course much more convenient. And, naturally, Muriel will now get one little row upon the lake with her Cyril."

"*Le roi est mort, vive la roi!*" I can see at once that, so far as Carrie is concerned, Jones and Brooke and their lovers'-woes are already forgotten, and that the tall young man in gray is the one important thing at present. As I myself feel a sneaking kindness for this tall young man, I forbear to sneer.

And so to sleep. All through my dreams are tinged with living memories of glowing beauty—of mountains red with the fires of dying sunsets; of placid lakes asleep within the arms of a pale silver moon; of tall, dark firs and drooping, snowy blossoms; and a very harmony of echoes, resounding from fairy glen to wild, bare rock and back again, until the distance swallows them and they are lost. In vain I seem to search for them, striving with this and that monster imprisoned in the strange fastnesses of the majestic mountains, until my dreams become a misery. Surely the faces of two of these Titans are known to me. That lean, long nose, that sallow cheek—once seen never to be forgotten—surely they belong to Brooke, disembodied, more fearsome than he was, but still Brooke. And that rotund form, that fleshy face? 'Tis Jones, 'tis he himself! In vain I flee. They compass me on every side. Frantically I rush forward and fling myself headlong into space.

There is a roar of many waters in my ears, a flash of myriad diamonds in my eyes, and swiftly I find myself, with a strange sense of being carried onward with an unearthly rapidity of motion, immersed in the magnificent torrent of the Torc Cascade. From rock to rock I bound, past glowing greens and trailing crimsons, hurrying ever and ever—whither?

"I've borne a good deal, George, but this is quite too much. Really, one had better be up and dressed, though tired to death, than listening to such nonsense. For all the sleep I can get, I might just as well never have gone to bed."

It is Carrie's voice. Oh, blessed sound! did I ever do the sweetness of it justice? With its coming, cascade, demons, all, vanish into thin air.

"You have saved me?" I cry, with a sigh of rapturous relief.

"I'm sure I'm very glad of it," says Carrie, dryly. "I wish I had done it an hour ago. Perhaps, as a reward for my valor, you will now give up your shouts and groans, and permit me to close my eyes for a few minutes."

I graciously accord her the permission demanded, and this time lose myself in a dreamless slumber.

Next day sees us speeding as fast as an uncommonly slow train can take us away from the land of beauty in which we have been sojourning. A little sad feeling has fallen upon Carrie and me. As for our companions, they are lost to all sentiment save one, and have ceased for the present to believe in any such foolish thing as regret.

With longing eyes we catch our last glimpse of wooded Torc, and watch the sunbeams playing upon Mangerton until it too fades out of sight. And now even the Paps are gone from us, and another land—one "flat, stale, and unprofitable"—seems to have opened on our view. As we reach Mallow, it is to us as though only a lovely memory is all we can call our own.

The change of trains here still further helps to break the links that bind us to the South. We breathe a tender sigh, and cast one longing glance to where fair Kerry lies. Involuntarily we kiss our hands to it, and so farewell to thee, Killarney!

LADY VALWORTH'S DIAMONDS

BY

"THE DUCHESS"

LADY VALWORTH'S DIAMONDS.

CHAPTER I.

THE coffee and toast are suffering, the eggs and kidneys are growing cold, the butter is looking distinctly aggrieved, and Sir Thomas, lifting his head from his well-aired *Times*, gazes across the table-cloth, with a solemnity even more pronounced than usual, at his step-son, Granit Boyle.

"Your mother is late again this morning," he says, testily. "This is, indeed, the third time this week she has been behind time."

"Old age begins to assert itself," suggests the younger man carelessly.

Something in the indifference of his tone nettles Sir Thomas. His brow contracts, and he stares angrily at the other, betraying how very little love there is lost between them.

"Age has nothing to do with it. Your mother is not failing in any way, however much that thought may find favor with you! Your entrance into your kingdom will not be yet, I hope and believe."

This reference to his inheritance of a considerable estate on his mother's death raises a smile upon Boyle's lips, and a contemptuous movement of his shoulders.

"I see no disgrace in old age myself," he says. "It has its drawbacks, perhaps"—with a look of studied insolence at Sir Thomas—"but its privileges too." He laughs slowly. "As you see, my mother is late—her privilege is to oversleep herself."

"Your mother, sir, has not been the same woman since the robbery of her jewel-case, a month since. It has preyed upon her cruelly, as any one—who—who"—in his odd, fuming manner—"had a spark of feeling in them

might have seen. But you are too devoted to your racing, your cards, your town dissipations, to spare a thought for one of the best women, the best mothers, who ever——"

His indignation is cut short in a very summary manner. The door is flung wide, and Lady Valworth, entering, totters to the nearest arm-chair and sinks into it.

"Oh! Thomas! Oh! good heavens!" she cries. "*The diamonds!*"

Sir Thomas, flinging down the *Times*, starts to his feet, and turns to her.

"Why the deuce can't you speak Lucinda?" says he.

"They are gone!—*gone*, I tell you! I've searched everywhere, and they are not to be found. This is the second robbery—and where is the fault to be laid? What on earth is to be done?" The poor woman, growing quite hysterical, covers her face with her hands, and sobs aloud.

"Your diamonds! The family diamonds! Bless my soul! Has the world come to an end?" cries Sir Thomas. "But there must be some mistake. When"—putting on his most magisterial air—"did you see them last?"

"Two nights ago. I wore them at the Eyers' dinner. You remember, Granit? You came with us."

"Yes, I remember," says Granit.

"It is absurd. It is outrageous! Is there no law in the land?" fumes Sir Thomas. "Have you sent for the police—a detective——"

"Of what use was the detective we got down from town about my emeralds," asks Lady Valworth, despondingly. "No; it is a conspiracy—a deeply rooted one!"

"Nonsense!" growls Sir Thomas; "it's burglars. D'ye see your mother's concern, Granit—what do *you* think, eh?"

"Servants, I should say," laconically.

"Oh, my dear Granit!" cries his mother. "But which among them would you first suspect? We have had excellent characters with them all; and Johanna, as you know, has been with me for twenty-eight years—in fact, ever since you were born. *Her* character is surely established."

"It is the people with established characters who invariably enrich themselves at the expense of their employers. In the long run, they reward themselves for the years of correct living that they have *endured*. Take my advice, and keep your eye on Johanna."

He laughs cynically. There is, indeed, what one might

almost believe to be an under-current of amusement in his tone.

"This Johanna should, indeed, be well known to you!" breaks in Sir Thomas; "she was your nurse, I believe. She, as I have learned, is devoted to you—has given you almost a mother's love."

He is gazing at the younger man with a slow scorn in his old, but yet brilliant, eyes.

"Surely all that is no reason why I should seek to defraud justice of its dues," says the young man, with an indolent uplifting of his brows. "You, as a magistrate, would surely not suggest such a course?"

"What d'ye mean, sir?" cries Sir Thomas, turning upon him so fiercely that Lady Valworth, who has had cause to dread a collision between them, rushes into the breach.

"Pray reserve discussion, however amicable, until later on," she implores excitedly. "I cannot listen to it now, I am so unstrung—so wretched. The emeralds were bad enough; but if nothing comes of the loss of these diamonds I don't believe I shall get over it. If they had been my own, I shouldn't so much have cared; but being yours, Sir Thomas, and expected by your heir—I——"

She breaks down again, and subsides into tears and her handkerchief.

"Now I must *beg* you will not so allude to this unfortunate affair," says Sir Thomas, a strong affection underlying the pomposity of his manner. "Let nothing outside the loss itself distress you—and, besides, there may be no loss; all yet is mere conjecture. Recovery of these jewels (if, indeed, they *are* gone) is sure."

"Positively certain," says Granit Boyle, with his inscrutable smile.

"In the meantime, as you are so unstrung, I shall recommend you a change," says Sir Thomas, laying his hand very kindly upon his wife's. "Go to town for a month or so, to your sister, Mrs. Brand—she always does you good—and leave me here to fight out this mystery."

But though he fights it out hardily, so far as money and perseverance can go, nothing comes of his exertions. The family diamonds have vanished as entirely, as mysteriously, as did the emeralds belonging to his wife a month before.

CHAPTER II.

LADY VALWORTH had been rather glad to avail herself of Sir Thomas' suggestion to spend a few weeks in town with her sister, Mrs. Brand—a fashionable woman of the world with a very kindly heart, who, childless herself, had adopted the daughter of a dead sister, now a charming girl of seventeen, and engaged to Granit Boyle, her cousin. She is, however, hardly to be regarded as a young lady fairly launched upon the world, as she is still undergoing a course of study with various masters, and a reading in German three times a week with a governess—a girl of about her own age, who had lived so much abroad as to be an almost naturalized Prussian.

Nadine Roche counted herself lucky when she sought and found employment in the home of Mrs. Brand. She had drunk sufficiently deep of the waters of affliction to be almost on the borders of despair, when Fate, who is not always unkind, shunted her onto the line that led to, at least, a glimpse of prosperity. Her pupil blossomed into her friend. Mrs. Brand took a special fancy to her. Her feet seemed to have dropped into the primrose way, and she felt at last, poor little soul, that she could lift her head to heaven with the firm assurance that she could walk, without fear of falling, upon the earth beneath.

Her pupil, Millicent Grey, is almost as pretty as she is, if not quite. A tall, stately girl with fringed lids, from which the brown eyes look out as if in wonderment at the world outside, and soft, sleek hair of a dark shade, that contrasts oddly with her *retroussé* nose, and that is so altogether put in the shade by the charming Grecian feature that distinguishes her governess. To many people, indeed, Nadine's merry mouth, and fair dancing locks, and eyes blue as a caverned sea, would have had their objections; but the child herself is so sweet, so gay, so suggestive of all things good and pure, that it would be impossible to regard her in any light except a kindly one.

With only the memory of a dear father—who had been a general in the Prussian army, although an Englishman—and a mother, very dear, but very dependent, to sustain her, Nadine, up to her connection with Mrs. Brand, had been compelled to look at life through anything but rose-colored spectacles. And of late a chance of still surer es-

cape from her dreary surroundings has suggested itself to her. Into her life (how, she hardly knew) a young man has fallen, who, whilst declaring his love for her, has at the same time repelled her almost as much as he attracts her. There had been a slight touch of romance in the manner of their meeting, but yet nothing very worthy of comment. A dull January night, ignorant of stars—a crowded crossing—a young man who had kindly come to her rescue in the absence of the necessary policeman, and who had piloted her across, through the tangled mass of vehicles, and landed her safely on the pavement at the other side. He had laughed aside her thanks, and, when she had insisted on them, had demanded largesse in the shape of permission to escort her to her home. "The night was so dark, so stormy, so destitute of comfort in any form, and she was so evidently timid about the conquering of those terrible rubicons, the crossings, and he was so entirely master of his time for the next four hours."

It hardly took him one, however, to guide her to her home. She had steadily declined his offer of cabs or hansoms, but had felt it ungracious to refuse him further when he said he would traverse the distance with her on foot. In truth, she had been glad of his escort, and not altogether blind to the beauty of his face; and yet, as I have said, there was a repulsion as well as a fascination even then in her feelings toward him.

There was one other thing that puzzled her. *Had* she seen him before? Those marked features, those soft, brilliant eyes—were they familiar? It seemed to her that somewhere in the rather immediate past she had seen him; but yet when he so kindly came to her aid on that crossing, just as she left Mrs. Brand's house, she could not connect him with any place or period, and after a while felt that her imagination had played her false in the matter.

When he had taken her home that night he had stood lingeringly upon the doorstep, until at last, in an uncertain way, half reluctant, half longing, half desirous of his departure, half eager to show some gratitude to one who had been so courteously kind, she had asked him to come in and let her make him known to her mother. The invitation was accepted with alacrity. Mrs. Roche, a gentle, tender-voiced woman, received him with a little soft dignity that astonished him; and two hours later, when he left them, as they fondly but erroneously believed, on his way to his bed, he laughed aloud to himself on the de-

serted pavements of that anything but aristocratic neighborhood, as he called to mind how he had indulged in tea and toast at that hour, and enjoyed them too. What eyes that girl had! What a mouth! How gentle, how sweet, how lovable! Yet there was a fire about her, too, that suggested many things, and made the pulses beat, and added ten thousand charms to those she already possessed. Well! He had lost his dinner, certainly, gazing at those *beaux yeux*, but there was always one's club, the gods be praised! and a supper that would be undeniable.

The acquaintance, thus opened, had been followed up with an ardor that perhaps astonished no one so much as the young man himself. He soon—astonishingly soon, as it appeared to Mrs. Roche—mastered the hours of Nadine's days. Knew when she was off duty and when on. Never put in an appearance on the Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays on which she gave her German lessons to Millicent Grey, Mrs. Brand's niece; but invariably dropped in on the afternoons of Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. On Sunday his visits were uncertain, but he came even on that day more often than he stayed away.

Mrs. Roche was troubled a little about him at first, but grew accustomed to him later on, and admiring him intensely as she did (regarding him, indeed, as a breath from that old world in which she once had moved, but which had proved cold and forgetful when fortune's sun went down upon her life) was openly glad and gratified when one day her daughter came to her and told her how Mr. Annerley had asked her to marry him, and how she had given him "Yes" for his answer.

The girl had not seemed either elated or, indeed, moved in any way when telling her story, but had sighed rather, and been a little petulant and impatient—a most strange thing for her—during the remainder of the evening.

Paul Annerley had followed up his proposal by a graceful word or two to the girl's mother that had more than ever prepossessed her in his favor, and the courtship had run ever since very smoothly, all things considered—the man being passionately in love, the maiden cool, if always gentle and sweet, and as adorable in manner as in face.

From the first Mr. Annerley had been extremely open about himself and his prospects. He would talk continually of "our office," and was always positively eager to enter into any question that related to his status in life, his "business," as he called it, or his income.

"It is neither big nor small now," he would say, with his charming smile, that showed all his beautiful teeth and lit up his handsome eyes. "But it will improve. I have many irons in the fire, and one *sure* thing, should all else fail. No, I never tempt Providence too far! I despise the man who puts his all upon the die. I would have a reserve fund somewhere, however small it might be. Not that I should speak despairingly either"—with another brilliant smile—"of the little I can really call my own. It is sufficient to give bread and butter at *least* to not only one, but two—perhaps, indeed, three, should the desires be modest."

Here the handsome eyes would fall meaningly upon pretty Miss Roche bending over her knitting, and then pass on to Mrs. Roche, with an even more meaning expression in them that the good lady would catch, and dwell on afterward with a maternal delight.

Ah! if her Nadine could but be placed beyond the fear of poverty—beyond the hateful drudgery of teaching. If her daily bread might be earned for her, instead of the dear feet being pressed every day into the toilsome path of labor! Yes; certainly Paul was very open, very explanatory about his prospects, though, perhaps, after all, the explanations did not amount to much. He had an office—somewhere! An extraordinary press of business—sometimes! He was utterly destitute of relations—his father and mother having died when he was "quite a little fellow," and he was an only child. His sisters, his cousins, and his aunts had no resting-place upon the face of the earth—he was, as he would remark often in his deep, pathetic tones, "alone in the world." He had friends, of course. Oh, yes! Every man had friends somewhere; but he found friendship a cold affair when all was told, and in fact he was a rather shy fellow about making acquaintances. He had never been so happy as since his fortunate meeting with Miss Roche, which had enabled him to gain an *entrée* into a house where, etc., etc. Perhaps this was true. Of his love for Nadine, indeed, there could be no doubt at all. His eyes seemed never at rest except when following the girl's movements, and drinking in each expressive glance of the exquisite face. When away from her he would laugh aloud to himself at times at the vague, wild, but unconquerable longing, that never left him, to go to her, to see her, to touch her hand, to hear her voice again. His love was a passionate one—an idolatry! He recognized it as

such, and, whilst marvelling at this strange feeling that had taken such entire possession of him, gloried in it, and clung to it with all his might.

CHAPTER III.

"I AM tired to-day," says Millicent, with a little, pretty, weary gesture, throwing her arms above her head and laughing softly. "And idle, too. I sha'n't do any German, so you may as well sit and gossip with me, instead."

"But—" begins Nadine, feebly. She is plainly delighted at the chance of scamping the German.

"I've told auntie I'm not going to look at a book to-day, so you may rest yourself in that chair with a quiet soul. I wouldn't be as conscientious as you, Nadine, for a king's ransom. Not that that would be much nowadays, with all these Nihilistic doctrines gaining ground as they do. Are you comfortable in that overgrown chair? You look a trifle lost."

"I am quite happy," says Nadine, with a sigh of content.

She is feeling fagged and nervous, and is glad to rest in Millicent's pretty room with no chance of being allowed to move for an hour at least.

"Lucky you!" says Miss Grey, dropping down upon the hearth-rug and taking her knees into her embrace. It is only April yet, and very chilly. "I'm not. Oh, yes; I know! You needn't finish what is on the tip of your tongue. I have everything the heart of girl can desire—the best of aunts, plenty of money, a season before me (a first one, too) a lover, and pretty much my own way—and *still* I am not happy! I say, isn't it a shame keeping me at my lessons, when in another month I shall be eighteen, and presented, and all the rest of it?"

"Well, I certainly think they might as well have let you off the month."

"It's downright mean of auntie—and, as a rule, she isn't that, eh?"

"I think she is the kindest woman I ever met," says Nadine, with sudden fervor.

Her English is exceedingly pure, but there is just a suspicion of a foreign accent in her tone when she grows in any way excited.

"She is—there isn't a doubt of it," declares Miss Grey, who likes to hear her auntie praised. "But, like the rest of us, she has her little weaknesses. Well, never mind. I dare say there are more unpardonable things in the world than Monsieur Lière and Professor Vredenburg. Nadine—say—that's a sweet little frock you have on. Where did you get it?"

"I made it. You really like it?" She stoops forward, and her lovely face grows pink with a pleased surprise. "I confess I thought it—well—not *bad*, myself—but to hear *you* praise it!"

"It is the nicest thing I have seen this many a day. I congratulate you on it. Next month, as I have told you, I shall be an emancipated being—free of even monsieur and the professor—with permission to order my own gowns; and then I shall buy myself the exact fac-simile of the one in which you are now looking so fetching. It will be a sort of satisfaction to you to see how exceedingly badly it will become me."

"Ah! probably I sha'n't see," says Nadine.

Quick tears rise in her eyes. It is not only that the loss of her engagement will be a serious lessening of the grist she brings to the mill, but she is fond of Millicent; and to lose her—the pretty, saucy, kindly friend—that seems very bitter.

"Won't you, though? What do you mean by that, pray?"

"Why, that I shall disappear with monsieur and the professor when you step upon the world's stage."

Miss Grey, bringing herself nimbly to her feet, drags Nadine from her chair, and compels her to stand in front of her.

"Now that I have brought matters to the correct point—now for the stage effect," she says airily. "You see, we are both very stagey in our sentiments to-day. Now, listen to my arrangement, and be warned in time that if you object to it murder will be done—here, in this very quiet room in Park Lane. Auntie is of opinion that I am unfit to go about without a keeper, and you are to be appointed such. See? According to auntie, you are a very model of propriety, and I am exactly the reverse. You are to take me in hand, and make me altogether such an one as thyself."

"Oh, Millicent! impossible! I could not do that."

"And why, then? What a tone! what a voice! Is it

possible you are going to say 'No' to my proposal? Have you forgotten that the consequences of such folly on your part will mean death? My dear Nadine, really though, what is it that you object to?"

"I shouldn't do at all as your companion——"

"Why not, you ridiculous mouse? Well, there! let us say no more about it just now. I never think myself; but I am always sure it is an excellent thing for other people to do when a little perplexed. However, *before* you begin to think, tell me one reason for refusing to be my guide and mentor."

A quick flash rising to Nadine's brow dyes her face crimson.

"You are going to be married?" says Millicent, quickly, noting the signal of distress.

"It is true—yes."

"And you never told me!" There is a strong reproach in her tone. Then—seeing the pallor on the face before her (the strange, sorrowful whitening of the beautiful face), that has chased from it the unwilling roses of a moment since—and as she marks the mournful drooping of the lips, and the look of terrible depression, nay, *fear*, that betrays itself in the shrinking form—pity overcomes her sense of ill-usage, and some sharp inner sense conveys to her the truth of it all. "You are afraid of something! You do not love him!" she cries impulsively, slipping down on the ground beside the lounge on which her friend has sunk as though unnerved and exhausted. "Come, you shall tell it all to me now, I am determined—late in the day as it is for your confidence. Is he old, ugly—a veritable Bluebeard, with coffers lined with gold; and are your people compelling you to marry him for the sake of his money?"

Her tone is half playful, half serious—wholly winning.

Nadine gives up to it.

"No; it is not that," she says. "My mother would be the last to urge me to such a marriage. And—and—he is not old, or ugly, or overburdened with wealth."

"Am I to think, then, that he is young, and handsome, and poor, and that you are still blind to his attractions?"

"That is it," returns Nadine, faintly. "I—when he is with me, talking to me, looking so kindly at me (he is very kind)—I tell myself that I *do* love him? But when he is away from—— Ach!" with a quick shudder, "I *know* then that my thought is vain."

"Romance is dead!" declares Miss Grey. "Handsome

as an Apollo, *and* poor, and yet you cannot be touched with the eternal fire. Fy upon you, then, you degenerate girl! After all"—with a sudden change of tone from the melodramatic into the distinctly commonplace—"you are just like me. My young man (phrase borrowed from Mary Jane, you will perceive) is quite all you have described yours to be—barring the poverty—and yet I like him quite as little as you do yours."

"My dear Millicent! And I always understood that——"

"It was to be a true love-match! A very ideal marriage! A veritable cooing affair! Disabuse your mind of that at once, my good girl. It is a match loved, indeed, by my aunt and my other aunt; but by nobody else, so far as I can see. He is to have me and auntie's money; I am to have him and his mammy's money. That's the arrangement. Fancy being flung upon a season with such a stone around one's neck, and expected to enjoy one's self!"

"It is your cousin?"

"Yes; Granit Boyle. You have never seen him; so I may as well say he is as good-looking as any girl could desire, save me. I am bent on an ugly man, Nadine—be sure of that. Simply because he is handsome, I dislike him so much. And yet"—she breaks off, and a little angry laugh widens her lips—"when you said a moment since that so long as your lover was with you you liked him, but that when he was gone you felt the full weight of his disagreeability press upon you, you said exactly what I should have said, had I been the first to explain."

"That is strange—a coincidence. But—but why marry him, if you feel so to Mr. Boyle?"

"Captain, an it please you, madam. He is one of her majesty's men. I am not so sure that I *shall* marry him. But I have been pressed into the matter because of auntie's desire to see me Mrs. Boyle (there is a remote title somewhere in the family, that she believes will some day descend upon me and make me 'my lady'). So I am supposed to be willing to barter my present for the sake of my future. But I am *not!* So *there!*" She somewhat angrily rattles the poker against the bars of the grate as she speaks. Then she looks up sharply at her companion. "Why are you marrying Mr. ——? You did not mention his name, by the by."

"Paul Annerley."

"A masterful name—nearly as bad as Granit Boyle—*that* sounds like the resistless rock as the wave beats hopelessly against it." She pauses as though sunk in a light reverie. "I am not a hopeless wave, however," she continues presently, her pause being so slight as to be almost imperceptible. "A rock myself, rather. Yet I look so frail—so fragile!" She gets up and turns to a mirror, and pushing back the soft silky hair from her low brow examines her face critically. "Yes—a rock!" she says decisively. "So, if my dear cousin does not improve on acquaintance, I warn him I shall not be dragged to the altar to suit his whim. I'd cut off my hair first! It was by the hair the mediæval parent dragged his child, eh?" she asks, turning to Nadine with a sudden smile.

"I believe you like your cousin, under it all," says Nadine, laughing.

"Well, I do, and I don't, as I have already said. Just now, I don't. But there are few men in town so handsome. So much I know, though I have not as yet come out."

"Describe him to me."

"He is tall, dark, earnest in expression. That is disappointing, I know; the modern villain being always tall, fair, *insouciant.* But—variety is charming. My villain is as I have said."

"Paul is dark, too," says Nadine, arching her brows.

"Ha! so! The plot thickens! *Two* villains in one drama is extravagant. I wish, however, Paul had been of the fair, die-away order, if only to make a diversion. Nadine, tell me, why are *you* going to marry your unloved villain?"

"He isn't a villain," begins Nadine; but Millicent interrupts her.

"Oh, yes, he is!" she says. "You take my word for it. Well, go on."

"I am marrying him because—because I think I *do* like him, and that my absurd repulsion when absent from him is a mean feeling only to be conquered to disappear for ever. And—and mamma will be happy if I marry him. She is so afraid that I may ever come to real want."

"He is rich, then? A man of property?"

"No. He has a clerkship somewhere in the City."

"Somewhere? Vague, I call *that!* Well, my good child, I'd see about that clerkship, if I were you, before putting my foot in it."

"Well—as a matter of course," says Nadine. Then she breaks into a merry laugh. "Naturally I should see it before putting my foot in it. But you need not be uneasy about that. Mother has made all inquiries, and he has entirely satisfied her."

"After all, my warning was absurd, People nowadays don't go about masquerading," says Millicent. "Tell me more of him."

"There is so little to tell. His eyes are a very dark brown."

"So are Granit's. I hate very dark brown eyes."

"His mustache is brown too."

"So is Granit's. I like a mustache myself."

"And I like a man with no mustache," says Nadine, softly.

"You don't say," cries her friend, with affected interest. "Tell me who he is."

Her shaft is a random one, not meant to strike home, yet Nadine shrinks from it as if hurt, and her cheeks grow deadly white. She clasps her hands together with a little impulsive motion upon her lap—clasps them so closely that her nails grow white.

Millicent, who, though frivolous in a certain sense, is neither unobservant nor wanting in affection, marks these signs of emotion, but, with a strange reticence, for her, refrains from taking any notice of them.

"A truce to lovers!" she cries, gayly. "I, for my part, am sick and tired of them. Here is a second piece of news I would impart to you. Uncle Timothy—you know my Uncle Timothy?—well, dear old man! he is going to give me, on the occasion of my 'first appearance,' the most exquisite set of diamonds and sapphires that are, I hear, in the United Kingdom. I am to be his heiress as well as auntie's, you know; and these jewels are to be worn by me—on my coronation, I was going to say—but I suppose I meant on my presentation. They tell me 'Her Most gracious' will pale with envy at the sight of them. Going now, Nadine? Nonsense! You must have your tea first. I'll have it served here, and it will keep you warm all the way home. Poor little cat! You *do* look tired! Have a glass of sherry instead—it will be much better for you."

CHAPTER IV.

It is quite six o'clock as Nadine leaves the house in Park Lane and turns her face homeward. It is very dark for even an April evening, and the lamps are all aglow, making her immediate world so pretty that she is rather glad than otherwise of her inability to meet with an empty tram-car, and, turning into Piccadilly, walks leisurely down its picturesque hill with a thorough appreciation of the charms surrounding her. It is late, certainly, but women —unless they go half-way to meet it—seldom meet with impertinence; and Nadine, pretty and distinguished in appearance as she is, pursues her way in an even, uninterrupted fashion toward Regent Circus.

A great, bulky woman, loaded with parcels, coming somewhat abruptly against her, stops her progress for a moment, and, compelling her to swerve aside, throws her almost into the arms of a young man just coming out of the Junior Army and Navy.

She staggers a little, being struck by a huge basket on the woman's arm, and instinctively seizes hold of the first thing near her. It happens to be the arm of the young man. Looking up to see who it is she has touched, she finds herself looking into the eyes of—*Paul Annerley!*

She is so surprised that words fail her, and she stands in a rather rigid attitude, gazing into his face. Yes, it is Paul beyond a doubt, but a Paul hitherto unknown. What has the City clerk to do with this fine young man, arrayed in evening clothes, emerging from a fashionable club? The lamps enable her to see that he is faultlessly attired, and betray to her the rich sparkle of a solitary diamond that adorns the front of his shirt. He has a cigarette between his fingers, and there is still upon his lips the amused smile with which he had parted from a companion a moment since.

This smile freezes rather when he sees Nadine, possibly because of his surprise at seeing her so unexpectedly. For a second only, however, does he look disconcerted. He draws her then out of the direct light of the lamp, and gazes down fondly into her questioning eyes.

"Surprised to see me here, and *thus!*" he says, with a low laugh. "I have many irons in the fire, you see, Nadine—as I once told you. To-night, two required turning.

One"—pointing back toward the club he has just quitted —"*there;* the other at a dinner to which my employer has bidden me. Were you thinking it unkind that I did not meet you to-night?"

"No, I am not thinking. I am too surprised," returns she, slowly.

"At the bursting of the chrysalis?" laughs he, gayly. "I am not altogether a butterfly yet, however; though I hope some day I may be able to show you life through very different glasses than those we now use. But how late for you to be out, sweetheart—and here, and all alone!" He looks irresolutely around him. "Oh, that I could see you home!" he says, fretfully: "but this beastly dinner, to which I am bound, is of such importance—" he breaks off again. "It is *horrible* to think how far you are from home!" he says, with such real concern in his tone as touches her.

"Don't be uneasy about me. I shall catch a tram at the end of this turn," she says, smiling. "There, go to your important dinner, and come to-morrow and tell me all about it."

She slips away from him into the shadow beyond, and, with a regretful sigh and a word better left unsaid, he jumps into a hansom, and is driven to the haven where he would be.

Meantime, Nadine once more finds herself face to face with one she knows. She had hardly turned away from Annerley when she found herself stopped by a tall man, who very gravely laid his hand upon her arm. This time, too, a little shock runs through Nadine's veins. She stops dead short, and looks up at her companion in a dull, stupid way. Before she had grown red, now she grows deadly white, and her heart feels as though it were about to stop beating.

"Ah! you! Mr. Duran," she says, faintly. "You—you frightened me—I——" she pauses.

It is impossible to account to him in any natural way for the emotion that is overpowering her.

"I saw you just now," begins Mr. Duran, and then stops.

He is a man of grave exterior, hardly good-looking, but with a strange, earnest expression, that goes far to redeem the irregularity of his features. He is about thirty-five, but looks considerably older than his age, as some men will. Grief, said many, had aged him—his wife having been taken from him when he was only twenty-six, and

when he had seen but two anniversaries of his wedding-day. But, as usual, gossip was wrong; those two unhappy years of wedded bliss having convinced Mr. Duran that all was vanity, so far as his wife was concerned. In truth, he had never loved her, but only learned that fact too late.

There is a suggestion of strength in his whole face, and specially in his mouth and lower jaw, that makes itself felt, and would perhaps be oppressive but for the almost womanish softness and gentleness of his large hazel eyes. A heavy mustache conceals a handsome mouth, and it, and the hair about his brow, are slightly tinged with gray.

"I saw you just now," he says, looking thoughtfully at the girl, who stands before him with lowered eyes, "talking to——"

He stops, as though he finds a difficulty about proceeding. His hesitation gives Nadine time to recover from her momentary confusion.

"I seem to be meeting all my friends this evening," she says, with a timid little smile, raising her eyes to his nervously.

"*Friends!* Do you call *him*——"

"Yes; a great friend, both of mine and of my mother's," interrupts she, with a palpable effort, but also with a touch of dignity.

Mr. Duran, as if reproved, bows slightly, and then dismisses the subject.

"Clytie writes to me to say she misses you terribly," he says, presently.

They have turned, and are now threading their way slowly through the ever-increasing crowd. Conversation under the circumstances is difficult.

"Dear little thing!" says Nadine warmly, and more naturally than she has yet spoken. This other little pupil of hers, this little daughter of the grave man walking beside her, is very dear to her. "Tell her I miss her too. Will you tell her that, Mr. Duran, please, when you write, and that I count every day to the one that will bring her back to me?"

"I shall tell her."

Then he looks at Nadine keenly. The girl seems to feel the earnestness of his regard, because presently she throws up her head, as if in challenge, and looks straight at him.

"You are thinking?" she asks, rather defiantly.

"How impulsively you express yourself, and how tenderly—and how uncertain I am whether you mean it or not."

"You give yourself great trouble to thus study your daughter's governess," replies she, coldly.

They have reached a crossing and a tram-car at the same time.

"You will permit me to see you home?" says Mr. Duran, quietly.

"No, thank you. There is no necessity. This"—indicating the tram-car—"will leave me almost at my own door."

"Still, if you will allow me——"

"You are very kind, but I would not give you so much trouble for the world."

There is decision about her manner, gentle as it is, not to be mistaken.

"As you will, of course," says Mr. Duran, and having seen her carefully into the car, and thought to himself what an inconceivably odious vehicle it was, he draws back, and lets her proceed on her way alone.

CHAPTER V.

"It *may* be as you say, but, my darling girl, if you would only listen to reason, I——"

"I can't bear reason, as you ought to know by this time, and I don't think that is a very correct way to address a girl who is engaged to be married!"

"A very correct way when she is engaged to the wrong man."

"Do you think you are the right one?" demands she, saucily.

"I don't think it, I *know* it," says he.

"Such knowledge is, no doubt, full of comfort," retorts she.

Drip—drip—go the fountains in-doors, where they are sitting behind the cool evergreens in the largest conservatory. Plash—plash—go the larger ones in the illuminated gardens outside. From somewhere beyond comes to them the last dying bars of a dreamy waltz—all round them the air is heavy with the breath of sleeping flowers. Massareene, leaning forward, lays his hands on hers.

"I wish you would think of it, Millicent," he says, in a low tone.

"Of what? My aunt's indignation? my uncle's contempt? the combined wrath of my entire family?"

"No. Of flinging off the bands that now bind you, and of love and happiness with me."

"Would it be happiness?" she sighs, impatiently, and then shuts up her large fan with an angry click. "I tell you it is not to be thought of," she says, presently. "Things have gone too far for any change to be now made. My marriage with my cousin, Granit Boyle, is as much a *fait accompli* as if we had stood, he and I, before my Lord Bishop."

"You can talk very coolly of it. It can't, after all, be so very displeasing to you, this idea of marrying a man you profess not to love," says the young man beside her, regarding her with affronted eyes. He rises quickly from his seat, and goes a good way from her, leaning against a marble pedestal that stands in one corner.

"Don't pose," says Miss Grey, calmly; "I'm not a photographer. And don't talk nonsense either. I am not one of the hysterical sort, and can certainly talk coolly of this marriage that is being forced upon me. I have had time to grow calm over it, you must remember, as we were betrothed to each other when I was almost a little baby in white muslin and blue ribbons. I was in white muslin then," says she, with a little, curious laugh; "*now* I ought to be in sackcloth and ashes. I feel so bad."

"And he—?" demands her companion with an effort.

"Wears his sacrificial wreaths with quite a jaunty air. I am an heiress, I would have you remember, my good sir. Granit Boyle is wise in his own generation."

"He's a mighty poor lot, to *my* way of thinking," says Mr. Massareene, in high disgust. Sometimes his Irish breeding makes a breach through his English education. "Don't mention his name to me—I can't bear to hear it."

"I don't believe it would cause me much of a pang were I never again to hear it myself," returns Miss Grey, who, if candor be a virtue, is possessed of it to an extraordinary degree.

After this a little silence reigns between them, then——

"Surely you are not mad enough to think you will be happy with him," says Massareene, excitedly. "He'll be the death of you. Looks like a man who would break a woman's heart. After all, supposing you *do* quarrel with your people—what then?"

"Then I should not only forfeit their esteem, which, after all"—with a swift glance at him from under her long lashes—"means a good deal to me, but I should cease to be auntie's heiress, and have my name struck out of Uncle Timothy's will. All that, my dear Gerald, would mean that I should be—still a lovely girl, no doubt"—with a rather constrained laugh—"but as certainly a penniless one."

She lifts her eyes resolutely as she says this, though it costs her something to do it, and looks keenly at him. If she had expected any disappointment, or blank, or awkwardness on his decidedly ugly face, she is mistaken. Gerald Massareene looks, if anything, relieved, in that now hope seems to have entered into him.

"My dearest girl, try to face that thought," he says, leaving his distant position, and once more dropping into the seat near her—much nearer this time. "I'm not a Crœsus; but if you could make up your mind to it, we might be able to make both ends meet."

"You have exactly seven hundred a year," says Miss Grey, who disdains subterfuge. "I found that out long ago by making inquiries."

Massareene laughs.

"You are worth a dozen of your sex in every way, but especially in one way," he says—"you never go in for deceit, however harmless, and you seldom beat about the bush. Yet seven hundred doesn't exaggerate it, and—ahem!—there is always, you know, the chance of the title when my uncle—Lord Ballymore——"

"Pouf!" interrupts Millicent, contemptuously. "When you have slain your uncle, you mean, who is almost as young as yourself, and who is as likely as not to have an heir at any moment."

"Not at *any* moment, my dear girl! The last—a third girl—is only a fortnight old, and several moments, at all events, must elapse before the arrival of the heir. And if it *shouldn't* come I——"

But Miss Grey declines to listen to any such weak imaginings, and Mr. Massareene, a little crushed, rather falls out of the conversation.

Being a young man, however, of indomitable courage and an unbounded supply of perseverance, he presently recovers himself, and returns to the charge valiantly.

"I can see I am hateful to you," says he.

"Oh, no! Certainly"—politely—"you are not that."

"You can't endure me."

"I can, indeed, without the slightest trouble."

"I'm an ugly fellow, I know."

"Everyone can't be as handsome as Granit," demurely

"Oh! to the devil with Granit!" says Mr. Massareene, losing his patience.

"With all *my* heart," replies she, amiably.

"I don't believe he cares a screw about you."

"My *dear* Gerald! What a very rude speech!"

"Well, I can't help it. If I thought otherwise, even though I worship the ground you walk on, I would say nothing."

"Do you really think that?"

"That he doesn't value you properly? Faith, I do."

"No. That a time could ever arrive when you could 'say nothing'? Ah! consider the cruelty of the privation."

"There, now, you are laughing at me as usual," says Massareene, and (for fear she'd be lonely, perhaps) he breaks into a low musical laugh also.

"That's a charming necklace you have on," says he, after a little bit, that I regret to say was spent in kissing the hand of Granit Boyle's betrothed. "What is it?—sapphires?"

"And diamonds—yes."

"A gift of—his?"

He looks really sorrowful now, as he tells himself how impossible it would be for him to rival such a princely gift. He might give his honest love—his whole life to her service—his very life; but there is no money with him to purchase such a magnificent gewgaw as this.

"No, silly boy! Where would Granit get it? Uncle Timothy solemnly presented it to me on the day of my presentation. That is quite a month ago now. Ah!"—with a quick sigh—"how long ago it seems!"

"Yet you have spent the greater part of it with—him!"

Mr. Massareene seems to have an unconquerable difficulty about pronouncing his rival's name.

"That's exactly why," returns she, calmly. "And so you admire my bawbles?"

"They are the finest things I have seen this season—or any other, for the matter of that." He feels quite a rush of enthusiastic admiration, now he knows that Uncle Timothy, and not the detested Boyle, has been the donor. "And how unique the shape! One could hardly forget them,

having once seen them. Those little heart-shaped balls falling from the necklet shine like fire in this light."

"There is a tiara, too, and a stomacher. But I didn't feel like living up to them—*yet.* Yes, it was a valuable gift, but one rather too elaborate for a *débutante.* Nevertheless, I wear it, if only to please him."

"You seem bent on pleasing every one, save me."

"And yet you I have pleased most of all," murmurs she, coquettishly—nay, saucily—leaning toward him.

He lays his hands quickly on her pretty rounded arms, and draws her to him. Her resistance is indeed faint. He bends his head. Their eyes meet—*almost* their lips—when the sound of a coming footstep causes both to start into a more reserved posture. The caress, so nearly won, is lost!

CHAPTER VI.

GRANIT BOYLE, emerging from behind an evergreen, comes leisurely forward, an inscrutable smile upon his firm lips.

"Our dance, Millicent," he says, in the slow, drawling tone to which she is so accustomed, and which she has begun to hate so heartily.

"I dare say," she says, coolly.

"Will you dance it, or pass the time in the gardens?—they are astonishingly pretty."

"That depends upon whom I view the gardens with," says she, glancing at him insolently from under half-closed lids.

"With me, of course."

"Ah!—then I shall dance it."

"As you will, my pretty cousin." There is a touch of vindictiveness in the smile he bends upon her. "Perhaps, even, you would prefer to neither dance nor go into the gardens with me, but spend the half-hour—*another* half-hour—here with Mr. Massareene."

If for a moment he had supposed he could confuse or disconcert her, he finds out his mistake at once.

"Yes, I should prefer that," she says.

Massareene at this makes a step toward her, but Granit Boyle waves him back with a curious laugh.

"No, no, my friend," he says, genially. "You cannot have it *all* your own way. I would not give up this dance

with my—cousin." He pauses, and then laughs aloud. "Do you know, Milly, I was very near saying, 'with my wife;' but that would have been unlucky, eh? Counting before the happy time, eh? But really, you know"—turning again to Massareene—"I would not miss this dance with Miss Grey for a great deal."

"It is astonishing how much you can say in a little time," says his *fiancée*, with an ill-disguised sneer, rising with deliberate want of haste from her low seat. "Well, if this thing has got to be danced let us go and do it." She lays her hand upon her cousin's arm, and moves away a step or two with him. Then she glances back over her shoulder at Massareene, who is looking a little white, and comes to a stand-still. "The next is ours," she says, in a very sweet voice; "come for me as soon as you can. I shall be glad to see you again."

This is as much as to say she will be overjoyed when her dance with the man who is her affianced husband has drawn to a close. Granit Boyle, with a smothered imprecation, moves on again, and she perforce accompanies him—but not to the ball-room.

"I am not going to dance this, nor am I going into the gardens," she says, with decision. "I am going to sit in the smaller hall, and criticize the people while they come and go. That will help to pass away the time."

"Until you can with politeness get rid of me."

"Don't be rude, my dear Granit. To put an unpleasant truth in glaring colors is always a mistake."

"I will be mistaken twice, then, for your benefit, and to prove myself by no means a fool in your eyes. You will sit here and criticize your neighbors until it is time for you to return once more to the arms—I beg pardon—the society of Gerald Massareene!"

"You have an excellent wit," says she, with an untroubled smile.

"You cannot, however, deny the truth that lies in it?"

"Why should I? You are such an extremely clever young man that one must believe you can see through the proverbial stone wall."

Mr. Boyle bestows a glance that is not altogether one of affection upon his future wife.

"Then you *don't* deny it?" he says.

"Certainly not. I should welcome the advent of anyone who would relieve me—I mean *you*—of the burden of your—that is *my*—presence."

She laughs aloud as she gives voice to this little impertinence—made all the more pointed by the affectation of modesty that runs through it. Granit frowns openly. If the day should ever come in which he might claim this wilful lady as his own—*if*—(it seems very improbable—at this moment specially so) he will certainly teach her such a lesson in propriety as she will not be likely to forget for the remainder of her days.

"Don't trouble yourself to try to be polite, even in ridicule," he says, in a voice that suggests a good deal of hidden wrath beneath the forced calmness of his demeanor. "But even you and Mr. Massareene cannot dance together all night without laying yourselves open to unkindly comment. An effete civilization has so ordained it, that the world has grown to look on such vulgar exhibitions of affection as—indecent."

Miss Grey lets her fan drop to her side, and brings her hands together with a sudden sharp movement.

"How *dare* you?" she says, in a low tone.

"Hah! At last I have touched you, my pretty cousin!" cries he, gayly. "A *little* of that revenge, so wisely called sweet, has fallen to my portion to-night. Why, you look positively pale! Come, pull yourself together; call upon that indomitable spirit on which you pride yourself, and give me back my blow! What—*still* no words? no seething sarcasm, no pointed barb envenomed? Pshaw! I gave you credit for more go than you possess."

His manner is maddening. Miss Grey, rising slowly to her feet, with parted lips through which the panting breath comes hurriedly, surveys him with a glance that would have subdued most men. But not Granit Boyle.

He rises, too, and picking up her fan with a nonchalant grace, hands it to her with a slight bow full of mockery.

"You look charming so," he says, "with that haughty expression on your handsome lips. Flattery is not only vulgar, I know, but the crudest of mistakes nowadays; but you will forgive me for it, when you see how feeling has carried me away. I am a devoted admirer of artistic effects. This, of yours, is perfect. I have always considered you pretty, my cousin, but never really realized the fact that you could be beautiful until now."

"You run it very fine," says Miss Grey, in a voice so subdued as to be almost a whisper. "You are daring. It would hardly suit you, perhaps, to be thrown over by the heiress of the season."

"The heiress of the season would not so serve a devoted lover," replies he, still with that light mocking laughter on his sneering lips. "If she did—why—she might *cease* to be the heiress of the season."

He had dealt his little blow in a soft undertone, but it tells. It is all so true! Her uncle, Timothy Boyle, her aunt, Mrs. Brand, the two whose wills make her an heiress, could as easily unmake her, were she to go contrary to their wishes. And they have decreed that she is to marry Granit Boyle, the son of their dearly loved dead brother, the first husband of Lady Valworth. A whim on their parts. A serious matter with the girl now standing, pale with passionate anger—with head down-bent and a heart that madly fights with cold reason for a victory. To give up this man and a future that will land her on the world's stage as one of the richest commoners in England, or to resign this man and cleave to that other, who can give her only a very modest income and a heart all gold. "To be, or not to be?" The struggle is sharp, bitter, but short-lived. She has been too well trained to willingly barter *all* for love. Cold reason wins the day, and the heart, sobbing, rebellious, fades into the background.

"As to the devoted lover part," she says at last, with a smile as careless as his own, "I will let you off all that sort of thing. We shall fulfil our destiny, you and I—we shall marry, and by such means gain money, and we shall die in all probability in the odor of sanctity—but of love, I thank you, we will say nothing."

"An excellent arrangement. They say those who love deepest say least about it. Shall we pose, then, as friends?"

"The least of all," returns she, with an angry flash from her large eyes.

"What! neither friend nor lover?"

"I have said so."

"Nor friend, nor lover, but only husband!" laughs he. "A very unique little affair altogether."

"Miss Grey, at last I may return to you," says a low voice at her elbow.

With a convulsive start she turns, and, as if involuntarily, holds out her hand to Massareene. There is something in the fond, kind, ugly face that now, at this instant—when her soul is filled with horror of him whom she has promised to marry—appeals to her strongly.

"Yes, yes—*at last!*" she murmurs, brokenly, and moves away with him without so much as a parting glance at Granit Boyle.

CHAPTER VII.

It is midnight. Twelve hours have been chimed by some great clock a mile away, the strokes falling solemnly on the still air of the summer night. Traffic has ceased, and only the sound of an occasional carriage may be heard, the red lights from its lamps flaming upward and sometimes casting a lurid shadow upon the bed where Millicent lies sleeping.

The girl had appeared a little tired, a little *ennuyée*, for the last day or two, and Mrs. Brand had decided upon her refusing any invitation for this one night at least. She should go to bed early, so would Mrs. Brand—the whole household, indeed, should retire at an abnormally early hour, and Granit, who was acquainted with all these circumstances and arrangements, was forbidden to call after six o'clock.

"Anything later will find us in bed," said Mrs. Brand, with laughing exaggeration. "So you know what to expect, my dear boy. I shall forbid Grimes to open the door, and I shall tell Lucy" (Millicent's maid) "that I have gone in for the early closing movement, because I am expecting an attack from burglars."

Boyle had laughed quite extravagantly for him at this little joke, telling her he would drop in early in the morning to see if they had lived through the terrible exordium of going to rest five nours before their lawful time.

"Would eleven o'clock be too early to come next day?"

"No! Oh, no! He might call then, and see if they had escaped the clutches of the imaginary burglar who was improvised to terrify the nervous Lucy."

Boom—boom—boom—goes the big clock somewhere! Millicent, as though disturbed by it, turns uneasily in her bed, and, as growing consciousness gains on her, sighs deeply. Alas! there are many reasons why she, the petted *débutante* of the year, should sigh profoundly. Her body, indeed, is well (this seems rather a grievance than otherwise), but her heart is sick and sore within her. Oh! the horror of having to marry Granit while her affection is all concentrated on another! And yet, to lose her inhen-

tance. To a girl trained as she has been—as hundreds of others are trained—such a consideration is paramount. To be cast from her throne, to be discarded by her world, to sink from a comparative supremacy to a sure mediocrity!—in that lies the sting.

If only the matter could be altered, and arranged for her on lines according to her own liking! She had thought of appealing to her aunt—had even hinted to her that Boyle was not altogether so dear to her as he should be. But Mrs. Brand had pooh-poohed all such hints as being mere girlish folly, and had told her that in time she would find her cousin was far above the average of the young men she met, and that they had good reason to believe a defunct title, that had once belonged to a branch of their family, would be revived in his favor.

How quiet the night has grown! Even in the heart of this surging London, it seems as though a time of rest can reign; the stir, the roll of the odd carriage or two, only enhances the extreme *deadness* of the calm. Millicent turns wearily upon her pillow, and tries with passionate anxiety to forget her woes in sleep. In vain she courts the wished-for slumber; in vain she seeks to kill her cruel thoughts. Still they remain with her, growing even more persistent as wakefulness grows upon her. Impatient, and angry with herself, and finding the night insufferably warm, she half pushes the bedclothes from her, with the intention of rising and flinging wide her window, when a slight noise in the adjoining room arrests her attention.

Is it a footstep? or one of those strange sounds that break the stillness of the night?—ghostly sounds that we all know, coming from nowhere apparently, yet loud enough to make the pulses beat and suggest a covering of the head with the friendly bedclothes.

Millicent, wide awake now, but uncertain, listens intently. She has indeed drawn back her foot into the shelter of the bed, but otherwise has shown no fear. Is it a step? It has stopped now. After all, it might have been auntie coming for her Cologne water, or one of the maids for the neuralgia cure that lies on the mantel-piece in her boudoir. In spite of these consolatory reflections, however, she cannot conceal from herself that she is growing frightened, and is regretting, with ever-increasing earnestness, the fact that she is sleeping alone, in a corridor cut off from the rest of the house.

Pshaw! after all, it was nothing—a silly scare. Silence

once more reigns supreme. Not even the indomitable mouse is to be heard. No scratchings, no squeaks anywhere. Not even a——

Good heavens! what was that? That horrible *stealing* sound in the room beyond. It is coming nearer and nearer!

Of *that* some horrible inner sense assures her, though now she can hear nothing. Oh, how the minutes drag! The knowledge that even if she screamed until life left her, she could not be heard by any one member of the household, adds ten thousand terrors to her already miserable situation.

Ah, *there!* There it is again—that stealthy footstep: more distinct now—more real. All in one moment every shuddering recollection of people murdered, every ghastly detail that she had ever read or heard, recurs to her, and makes the blood freeze within her veins. Soon, perhaps, that blood will be frozen eternally.

And now a maddening regret occurs to her. The bell! Why had she not thought of that sooner? To cross the room, to pull violently at it—even if her effort failed to bring one of the servants (a most likely thing, as all the servants sleep at the very top of the house)—at least she might have alarmed this midnight assassin, and sent him flying from the scene of his unlawful labors. But now! Is it too late yet?

Almost paralyzed by fear as she is, she rises cautiously upon her elbow, and is just about to make a rush for the bell, when——

CHAPTER VIII.

THE door beyond opens slowly, and a figure that looms large and terrible in the light of the dim lamp it carries appears upon the threshold.

Millicent, benumbed, fascinated, staring with wide eyes, sees a man dressed in the common coarse fustian suit of an artisan. The face is hidden; over it a mask of black satin is drawn carefully. This gives a last touch of terror to a presence already big with fearful mystery in the eyes of the poor girl gazing at it, in a spell-bound anguish, from over the frilled and dainty linen sheeting.

It is an impossible thing, in spite of all wise writers to the contrary, to account for human feeling—to arrange for

what it will cause the owner of it to do or say on certain occasions and under certain circumstances.

Millicent, a moment ago more dead than alive, when her fear was hidden from her, now that it appears before her in flesh and blood and an abominably bad suit of clothes, feels her soul rise within her, her courage grow apace, and lifting her eyes—though still in a very agony of doubt and horror—she stares at the intruder with some small semblance of defiance.

The intruder, however, being no doubt a man of base mind, to whom lofty sentiments are unknown, returns her would-be haughty glance through his mask with an air calm as a summer eve.

"Get up!" he says—neither more nor less, but just this concisely.

It is a demand that Miss Grey in her new-born fit of courage sees fit to scorn.

"I shall not!" she says from her stronghold behind the bedclothes.

However ignominiously she behaves afterward, it must now be said of her that she is filled with a high courage.

"Won't you?" says the man in fustian. His tone is remarkably high and squeaky; not—as Miss Grey remarks, even at this awful moment—like the voice of any human thing she has ever heard. "I give you just three minutes to get into your clothes: no more. Look sharp, and never mind your hair. That is a woman's first thought, isn't it? But it must go for once."

He laughs in so suppressed a fashion that she hardly knows what the laughter is like; but that it is wild and reckless, and decidedly *mirthful*, is apparent to her. It did not declare itself to her then, but afterward it occurred to her that his whole air was hardly in accord with the fustian.

"I shall not stir," she says, valorously.

"Then I regret to say that I must assist you," returns he, advancing toward her slowly.

This settles it, of course. Her high-born courage fades, evaporates. Her spirit dies within her. With both hands she clings to the bedclothes.

"No, no!" she gasps. "I *will* get up—only—only——"

"Go? That, of course," says the man as agreeable as he can in his squeaky tones. "I shall go to the next room, for precisely five minutes by my—no, by the way—*your* watch. Don't, let me advise you, let it be longer."

He strides toward the door by which he has entered, and then suddenly stops short. So does her heart. Once again she had dwelt upon the hope of what a ringing of the bell might bring forth; but as if the mysterious being had read her inmost soul, he now turns to her.

"By the by," he says, "to ring your bell may suggest itself to you. You might ring a thousand bells in this house, I verily believe, without result; but still I decline to take the chance. After all, I think I shall stay here, in this remote corner, while you put on your dressing-gown."

"Oh, *no!*" The words break from Millicent desperately.

"No? You would prefer not? But——"

"I swear to you I will not ring the bell," declares she, wildly. "I don't know why you wish me to rise; but yet I give you my word I will not touch the bell, if you will only go into that next room and give me the five minutes you have promised."

"A woman's oath is not worth a halfpenny, to say nothing of her word," says the stranger pleasantly. "But still, I will grant your request with just this last word. If you play me false, if you seek to summon aid in any way, I shall"—drawing a revolver from his pocket and handling it tenderly—"*blow your brains out!*"

The words fall from him in a whisper—delicately—so mildly indeed, that no suspicion of violence should rest with them. Yet Millicent, as the door closes behind him, shudders vehemently, and her teeth chatter as though she has been stricken with a sudden chill.

With trembling haste she springs from her bed, hurries on her clothes, and having covered herself finally with a soft, warm dressing-gown, stands shivering with expectation upon the carpet. She must have got through her task with far greater speed than she had imagined—in three minutes, instead of the allotted five, as a good while elapses from the time she had finished her hurried dressing to the dreaded moment when again her foe appears before her.

"You are a paragon," he says. "Permit me to congratulate you. I *said* five minutes—I *gave* you seven; it appears three would have been sufficient. But now to business. Where are those sapphire and diamond ornaments that have made you the envy of all beholders this season, and added a faint lustre to the brilliancy of your charms?"

Yes—certainly his manners are not in keeping with his clothes!

"My sapphires!" gasps she, feebly.

"*And* diamonds! Do not detract from their value. Come!"—sharply—"let us have no nonsense. I know you keep them in this room or the one beyond; but where? I assure you—I *beg* you to believe that I would not for worlds have roused you from your happy dreams, had not my failure to discover the jewels compelled me to apply to you for assistance."

"My uncle always keeps them," begins the girl, telling her lie without a regret, in the fond but vain hope that it may save her sapphires. All at once the suave manner of the man disappears, and an angry oath escapes him.

"Look here, girl!" he says, roughly, though his voice is fine and squeaky as ever, "no trifling! I *know* these stones to be in your keeping, and I shall have them to-night, or——" He pauses, draws the revolver again from his pocket, and significantly clicks it. "Where are the sapphires?"

"Over here," says Millicent, now fairly cowed. She moves mechanically toward the wall opposite, and, raising her hand, touches a spring that is evidently connected with some secret press in the wall—a press concealed by the papering.

A small door flies open, and not having the courage to actually give him her treasures (jewels are always dear to a woman, be she good or bad), she points faintly to the disclosed cupboard.

The man in fustian lifts his lantern, peers curiously into the recess, and with a low cry of triumph seizes upon the different cases that lie side by side upon the wooden shelf. Cool, even in the moment of victory, he opens the cases deliberately one by one, to make sure of the contents. Yes, they all lie there—the beautiful glittering things, for which a girl is crying, and for which a man is bartering his soul!

Lifting his head, after a sharp but hurried examination of the stones that apparently satisfies him, he sees that Millicent, too, is gazing earnestly at the pretty bawbles once hers, so soon to be hers no longer; and that as she gazes, her soft eyes are full of tears.

"Seems cruel, eh?" he says. "Well, that you may say in the future I was not ungenerous, I will leave you *this* out of your treasures for which you are so ready to shed

your tears. I wonder if they are dearer to you than—" He pauses abruptly, as one might who has been about to say something better left unsaid. "Than your lover." He winds up with that low, suppressed laugh again, that certainly does not belong to him, and thrusts into her unwilling hands a small but exquisite locket, heart-shaped, glittering with sapphires and diamonds.

"Think it is a gift from the man you will marry," he says, lightly, in that disagreeable voice of his. "And now, follow me—or rather, go before me—to the door."

It is the door leading to the corridor without to which he points. Millicent, still as one in a dream, obeys him and goes toward it. He opens it carefully, and backing outward on to the corridor, always with his eyes on hers, comes there to a standstill.

"I bid you good-night, madam," he says, mockingly. And then (she can remember little about it afterward, so swift it was)—something was flung over her face, and pressed there; there was a moment's struggle—a moment that to her was an eternity—and then a strange dulness; the sound of a door hastily closed; the echoing of departing footsteps; a sense of suffocation, and afterward a ceasing from all knowledge, and a deadly blank.

CHAPTER IX.

It is eight o'clock on the ensuing morning when Lucy, Millicent's maid, rushes sobbing into Mrs. Brand's bedroom.

"Oh, ma'am! Oh, my young lady! Oh, ma'am! Oh! *poor* Miss Millicent!"

"What! What is it? *Speak*, girl!" commands Mrs. Brand, her face growing pale with nervous expectation.

"Oh, ma'am! that I should live to see this day! Oh, poor, dear Miss Grey! Her as I was so fond of. Her as never said a word unkind to mortal soul. To see her now, and to think that only yesterday——"

"What do you mean, girl?" cries Mrs. Brand, ringing the bell frantically. "Good heavens! What has happened to Miss Grey?"

"Oh, to only look at her, m'—I thought I'd 'ave dropped at her feet when I pushed the door back, never

knowing why it was so hard to open, and she lying against it, with her poor head——"

"This woman will drive me mad!" cries Mrs. Brand in a choked tone, and, hurrying past her, makes her way to Millicent's bedroom.

Already two or three servants have gathered there. The door is open, and they are stooping over something lying on the floor almost immediately beyond the threshold.

Mrs. Brand, with a little cry, and pale and trembling, rushes forward, the servants part involuntarily, and there, lying upon the ground, to all appearance lifeless, lies Millicent. Her head is thrown backward, and one hand is tightly clinched.

"She is fainting. It is *only* a faint!" cries Mrs. Brand, with an anguish in her tone that belies the meaning of her words. "What are you all standing idle there for?" turning upon the terrified women. "Has no one thought of sending for a doctor?"

She is down on her knees now beside the pale still form, and has raised the cold head on her arm.

"Yes, m'; James has gone for a doctor," sobs the housemaid, nervously.

"Help me to lift her. So! Oh! be *gentle*, girl! There —on her bed. Pull up the blinds—what are they down for at this hour?—one would think she was *dead!*"

She says this vehemently, with a sort of defiance. But the awful word is too much for her—it has hardly passed her lips when her fictitious anger gives way, she bursts into tears, and, falling on her knees beside the bed, she stretches out her arms to the unconscious body.

"Oh! my child! My pretty girl! What is it? What has happened to you? Oh! Millicent, speak to me!"

The doctor entering at this moment, she calms herself by a supreme effort, for in truth the poor woman is terribly unnerved—no smallest suspicion of tragedy having ever come near her before, in all her calm, easy, luxurious life.

"H'm! ha!" says Doctor Thesby, sniffing about him suspiciously as he walks lightly to the bedside and stoops over Millicent. "Young lady been playing pranks with chloroform?"

"Oh, no! Impossible!" exclaims Mrs. Brand. "Indeed, I hardly think there is any in the house. Certainly none that is not under lock and key in my own room."

"Nevertheless, there is chloroform here, or has been"

says the doctor, sniffing again. He has been examining Millicent while speaking, and now calls for certain things to be brought him by the attending servants. Seeing Mrs. Brand's distress, he turns kindly to her. "I can't quite make it out yet, but pray compose yourself, my dear madam. Your niece is by no means beyond the power of man yet."

And, indeed, at the expiration of half an hour or so, Millicent is so far recovered as to be able to smile upon them, and whisper a word or two to her aunt.

"No whispering, I think—no confidences just yet," says Doctor Thesby, rubbing his hands. "Though I agree with you, my dear lady, that no time should be lost about seeing into this—er—truly—extraordinary affair. What d'ye say, my good woman," turning sharply to one of the maids. "A handkerchief, eh? Picked up by you? Lying on Miss Grey's face—or *partly* so? eh? eh? Think what you are saying now, my good girl, as I dare say you will have to repeat it pretty often later on."

Yes. The girl had picked it up when first she stooped over Miss Grey. It was not exactly *on* her face, but looked as if it had slipped off it.

The doctor folding it neatly, puts it in his breast-pocket. "Important evidence, madam! If you will permit me, I will take charge of it. Heavily saturated with chloroform, I should say, from the strength of the aroma that still clings to it."

"Let me see it," says Millicent suddenly, in a voice so much stronger and with such excitement on her pale face, that the doctor thinks it better to accede to her request, while still entreating her to "Be calm!—be calm! and above *all* things to be calm!"

"As if," said Millicent afterward to Nadine, "*anyone* could be expected to be calm who had just escaped being murdered, and had had the finest sapphires in England stolen from her!"

The handkerchief is a large, coarse, common one, white in color, and of such a texture as might be used by a respectable artisan on a holiday-making.

"It is a clew," says the doctor, triumphantly; but Millicent, though she could not have put her conviction into words, feels that it will never help to bring the real offender to justice.

"But what brought the man here—that is what I want to know?" demands Mrs. Brand, with a little spreading of

her hands, when the doctor has called some hours later to find his patient has been sleeping quietly during his absence, and has only roused to consciousness again upon his entrance.

"Not a word have I let her speak—not a word," says Mrs. Brand, with very pardonable pride, considering the extent of her curiosity.

"Well, I must speak now," murmurs Millicent, still very feebly, but with a decided increase of strength that the doctor finds very satisfactory.

"Why, we shall have her down-stairs in no time," declares he, jovially.

Then Millicent launches into a description of the man who had thrown a handkerchief over her face, and left her to live or die, as chance dictated, while he made good his escape. It is this information that calls forth from Mrs. Brand the question as to what brought him into her house *at all* at that unseemly midnight hour.

"Ah! auntie!" says the girl, looking at her out of her cushioned arm-chair, with great pathetic eyes that have grown greater because of the regretful tears that are filling them. "Do you not know? Do you not guess? When you opened my hand, and the sapphire locket dropped out, did you guess nothing *then?*"

"No, child—no."

"That locket is a gift to me."

"A gift? I know that," impatiently. "A gift from your uncle Timothy, with all the rest of those very beautiful stones. A magnificent gift, truly."

"No!—a gift from the man who has stolen all those unrivalled stones!"

"Stolen!" Mrs. Brand falls back in her chair, and gazes at Millicent with horror-stricken eyes.

"What! Gone! Those priceless sapphires!" cried Dr. Thesby, who is an old friend of Mrs. Brand's and had been shown the sumptuous gift of Timothy Boyle when first presented to Miss Grey.

"Ah!" says Millicent, laughing hysterically, "the burglar evidently did not think them, as you do, *priceless*. No doubt he is already pricing them—is arranging how to break them up and sell them—breaking up—my—lovely—necklet—my beautiful—" Here, being still very weak, she gives up her mournful description, and subsides into a storm of tears.

"There, there, darling! Oh, don't cry like that! Think

of your weak state. But what an audacious thing! Bless me, what will your uncle say? Now, my dearest love, I implore you to control yourself. Remember how that unmitigated villain nearly deprived you of your life only a few short hours ago. In this very chamber, Doctor Thesby. Oh! to think of it! It must have almost happened on *this very spot!*" Here she grows tragic, and speaks in a deep bass tone that she believes befits the occasion. "Oh! Millicent, darling, you will break my heart—your old auntie's heart—if you keep on sobbing like that. Dear! dear! dear! to think that those sapphires—heirlooms, doctor—and the finest in England—indeed in Europe, I might safely say—are now being melted down—that is, broken up, or whatever it is those terrible men do to them—while we are sitting inactive here! Can *nothing* be done? Oh! Doctor—Doctor Thesby! What is the matter with her now?—*has* that wretch succeeded in killing her after all?"

Millicent, in fact, driven to despair by this prolonged lament, has gone into violent hysterics.

"No, ma'am, *he* hasn't," says the doctor, with severe meaning, who had tried to stem the flow of Mrs Brand's eloquence, eagerly but ineffectually, during the past five minutes.

CHAPTER X.

It is about five in the afternoon when Nadine rushes up the stairs, horrified by what she has just heard in the hall, and flings herself into her friend's arms.

"*Such* a thing to happen to you!" she cries, in her little, rapid fashion. "The miscreant!—the assassin! Oh, Millicent! when Brown" (the butler) "stopped me in the hall to tell me the dreadful news, I nearly fainted. Only the idea of seeing you face to face to make sure of your escape sustained me, and gave me strength to get here."

Indeed, she is as pale as a ghost, and her eyes are full of tears. Sweet eyes! as full of love as tears.

"Well, now you *have* seen me," with a laugh, and a gentle shake administered to the trembling Nadine, "cheer up a bit, and let the blood flow into those wan cheeks. Talking about blood flowing, I'm glad mine was not let loose last night."

"Oh! don't—don't!" says Nadine, shuddering violently.

"Well, there, there. I have unnerved you, and I ought to be ashamed of myself. But the fact is, I am unnerved myself, only *my* nervousness has the effect of raising a sense of ridicule within me. I cannot keep from jesting on last night's adventure, though I dare say to-morrow I shall be prostrated. It is a strange excitement, better not indulged. Well! it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. You cannot compel me, tyrant that you are! to stammer over my German to-day."

An arrangement had been entered into between them some weeks ago, when Millicent had been brought out, and was supposed to have left her childhood and the schoolroom behind her. Nadine, for many reasons, would not consent to be her companion. One was because she could not well leave her mother; another because of her engagement to Paul Annerley; another (was it so *very* important?) because she could not give up the tuition of Mr. Duran's little daughter. So Millicent had squared matters by declaring to her auntie that though she considered she knew as much music as would carry her on through life, her knowledge of German was still singularly deficient, and auntie, delighted at this trait of intellectual diligence in her niece, had at once requested Miss Roche to continue her three visits a week to Park Lane as heretofore.

"Tell me about it," says Nadine, breathlessly, her big blue eyes enlarged with fear and curiosity. She has seated herself on a dainty *prie-dieu*, and is leaning forward with clasped hands in an attitude highly suggestive of prayer, and therefore highly suited to the chair.

Millicent, nothing loath, makes her a present of the entire scene from beginning to end.

"He might have been a much worse burglar, all things considered, and there was quite a touch of chivalry—a suspicion of Claude Duval—in the fact of his making me a present of my own locket," she says, still unable to refrain from turning the whole thing into ridicule. "To go to the very root of the matter, it must be confessed that I am the proud possessor of his *heart*. He left me that at least."

"The coward!" says Nadine, clasping her pretty hands, "to attack alone one poor woman! Yet, of course, one must feel thankful to him in that he spared your life."

"Just barely. But that was my own fault. The chloroform lasted for a certain time. I remember reviving, but only sufficiently to call to mind the hateful presence of the man, who seemed so close to me even then, when he was

gone, that I very foolishly fainted. I had not yet recovered from that faint when they found me."

"Poor Mrs. Brand! How she must have suffered."

"I wonder she let you come to me. Strict quiet was enjoined—a regimen that I confess was fast driving me into an *un*quiet that would have startled them considerably later on."

"I met her outside the boudoir. She called to me. Said she had to go in and satisfy some people who had called to make anxious inquiries about you——"

"Nonsense!"—cynically. "About the romantic burglar rather."

"And that she would have to see them, so she would be glad if I would sit with you for a while. How glad I was of the permission! But, Millicent, from what you tell me, I—I don't think the burglar could have been quite a common man."

"Far from it. Have I not told you that he was a sort of Dick Turpin, or Duval? Certainly my hero's voice was squeaky, but you can't have everything; and after all some people haven't got a burglar at all, so I am richer than they. I have his present, too, and it isn't often I am presented with promiscuous gifts, except by auntie or Uncle Timothy or you."

Nadine laughs.

"My gifts!" she says, contemptuously.

"Are the nicest I have, because I like them best; best, that is, all save *one*."

"Your poor sapphires, you mean. Oh, Millicent! what a cruel thing to take away your lovely jewels. Mrs. Brand is distracted about them."

Millicent makes a little *moue*.

"I am not yet quite sure," she says, saucily, "whether my murder, or the loss of the jewels, would have been the greater calamity. They were the finest sapphires in England, and I am far off being the finest woman—so that really, on the whole, I suppose the sapphires were the bigger loss?" She smiles. "But I was not thinking of those luckless stones. I was thinking rather of a tiny gift that was sent me on my last birthday—a fortnight since."

"You did not tell me of it."

"No? Well, I'll tell you now." She pauses, and, stooping forward, takes both Nadine's hands and looks keenly into the girl's beautiful face. "You love me?" she asks, gravely.

"You know that," returns Nadine, gently.

"Well, I'll trust you."

She lifts her hand, and, drawing upward a thin gold chain that encircles her neck, discloses to view a small but exquisite locket attached to the end of it.

"That is it," she says. "That is the gift I prize even beyond yours. It was Gerald Massareene who gave it to me."

Perhaps she is a little shaken by her late adventure, because tears stand thickly in the eyes she has fixed on Nadine.

"Ah! It is not Granit Boyle, then, it is Mr. Massareene," says Nadine, in a subdued whisper.

"I hardly know—that is, about Gerald. I am perfectly certain about Granit Boyle, though. Granit! How the name suits him! He looks as hard as flint. Well, it was Gerald gave me this little, sweet, pretty thing a fortnight ago."

"Why do you wear it hidden?"

"Why do you ask, my innocent? Because I am an engaged young woman; and young women, when engaged, are not allowed two strings to their bow—though they may have half a hundred before their engagement, and welcome. Such are the laws of our society land. Yet all laws cannot prevent my loving this little locket better than——"

She pauses. She had almost said, "Than the colossal fortune that awaits me on my marriage with Granit Boyle," but her lips refuse to utter the heresy, and Nadine entirely misunderstands her hesitation.

"Better than Mr. Boyle's presents!" she supplies, softly.

Millicent throws back her head, and, as though drawn by this simple remark out of a labyrinth of sentimental reminiscences, sighs first very heavily, and then bursts into a paroxysm of laughter.

"*Granit's presents!*" she says. "Will you believe it? My affianced husband—my future lord and master—has never yet deigned to lay at my feet any gift, however small. There is consolation in that fact. I owe him, therefore, literally nothing."

"It is strange, is it not?" says Nadine. "I am better—or is it worse—off than you? Paul, only a week ago, gave me such a lovely pendant. All a mass of gleaming diamonds."

"That's what *I* call a lover," says Miss Grey, gayly. "I

believe this Paul of yours is better than you describe him, and that you will be happy with him yet. Diamonds, too! And he, comparatively speaking, poor. I congratulate you. He has a generous soul."

"I wish he hadn't done it," says Nadine, looking troubled. "It is such a costly gift, and—and—it seems to bring me more closely to him."

"It is a great comfort, nevertheless, to know he isn't stingy," says Miss Grey. "I have more rings than I know what to do with, but I must say I think it disgracefully mean of Granit not to have given me one to mark our betrothal. However, as you have suggested to me, I therefore owe him the less."

"Never mind him," says Nadine, quickly. "For my part I would far rather hear about your burglar. Was he tall—handsome?"

"Handsome! Why, I couldn't see a feature in his face. You don't suppose that that sort of person comes round with an open ingenuous countenance, ready for all men's inspection? If so, you are mistaken. My burglar came with a mask that prevented me from seeing the chiselled features that I feel convinced lay beneath it. Altogether, he was not of the common every-day lot that one meets. He was a departure from the regular lines. He was strange to me! Strange! And yet——"

Suddenly the half-mocking, wholly gay air she has used hitherto drops from her, and she turns upon Nadine a startled glance. She leans toward her, and laying her hand upon her shoulders, subjects her to an exhaustive scrutiny.

"I *must* speak. I *must* tell you," she says at last. "It has weighed upon me ever since, and—and—the others would consider it in the light of a nightmare, or else say the idea arose from a feeling of nervous horror; but it did not."

"What is it, Millicent? You forget I do not understand," says Nadine, a little awed by the solemnity of the other's glance.

"Just this: that that terrible burglar, from the time he entered my room to the time he left it, seemed strangely familiar. I cannot account for it. His voice I never heard before. He was dressed in the clothes of a common workman, and I know no workman. His face, indeed, was hidden——"

She stops abruptly, as though oppressed by some hidden thought.

"Yes, it was hidden," she says at last. "Yet I am pursued by a hideous fear that if I could have removed that mask, the features *would have been familiar to me!*"

She sinks back in her chair, looking pale and exhausted.

"It is mere nervousness," says Nadine tenderly. "A chimera arising from an overwrought sensibility. Do not think of him again, darling. Rest and time will cure you of that foolish phantasy."

"Nothing will cure me of the *certainty* that a face well known to me lay behind that humble mask," returns Millicent with a shudder.

She rallies a little after a while, and a swift smile curves her lips.

"We are a doomed family," she says gayly. "A prey to burglars. First my aunt, Lady Valworth's, diamonds disappear, not to be restored by all the detective power in England, and now my sapphires! Poor Uncle Timothy! he gave much of his life to a contemplation of those stones, and now a vulgar criminal is the possessor of them. It is very cruel of me to laugh, is it not? Especially as I am the only one that can see a comical side to the affair. Yes, I am sorry that I am not more sorry because of their disappearance."

"Has Mr. Boyle yet heard of their being stolen?"

"Not yet. He was to have been here this morning, but——"

"He was here this morning, darling," says Mrs. Brand, who has just entered the room and heard the drift of the conversation, "but you were then so weak that, of course, I could not see him. He heard nothing, as I told Brown to be silent about our sensation to any caller—so he merely left word that he hoped your headache would be better soon (I suggested headache to Brown as a general and safe sort of not at home), and that he would call again tomorrow morning."

"Wonderfully attentive for him," says Millicent, smoothing down the laces of her loose gown.

"Dear fellow! He is always all he ought to be! So like his good father," says Mrs. Brand effusively.

The shrug that Millicent gives her pretty shoulders is so faint as to be imperceptible to any one save a sympathetic friend like Nadine. The latter, seeing it, grows a little down-hearted as she dwells upon the loveless union that awaits the charming creature, so full of life and

gayety, who is now smiling at her with friendly, laughing eyes. Once—a long, long time ago it seems now, she had seen Mr. Boyle—yet hardly seen him either, so dark was the hour, and his head half turned from her. She could not, indeed, have been sure of a feature in his face, and though in an inconsequent fashion she seemed to carry away with her an impression of him that served her now and then when trying to picture to herself the lover of her friend—still she knows the idea formed was incomplete, and that probably, if ever brought face to face with the original of her imagination, she would not know him. There had been no formal introduction between them—he had been simply passing by when some one told her *that* was Granit Boyle! Passing so quickly that, as I have said, only a shadowy recollection of him remained.

Millicent is so dear to her that sometimes she thinks she would have liked to know something of the man who is to be her husband. But Captain Boyle's duties for the past three months prevent his calling upon his *fiancée* more than three times a week—and on the very days of all others when she, Nadine, is not expected in Park Lane.

"Inspector Dunn has just been here," goes on Mrs. Brand presently. "He seems a clever man, and holds out great hopes of being able to catch the robber, and restore to you your sapphires. I ran up at once to tell you. He seems to think it will be difficult to get rid of the sapphires, even should the robber go to Antwerp or some of those foreign places. All the shipping ports are being closely watched. He really gave me great hope. Your uncle Timothy has been here on and off all day, but I would not let him see you, he was so excited. Of course, he feels the loss of the jewels. He thought a great deal of them. That is hardly to be wondered at, my dear Nadine, considering their size and their purity. I assure you, people have been known to go out of their minds for far less cause. Are you going now, my dear? Well, I suppose it is getting late. Such a comfort as it has been to me to know you were with Millicent while I was trying to explain things to those stupid De Laines. They *would* have it that my poor child had had her skull crushed in, and that the burglar had been discovered hiding behind the drawing-room curtains—such nonsense, you know! Well, good-night, then, dear child. Be sure you come as early as you can on Thursday; Millicent is always so much better when she has had an hour with you."

Having kissed Nadine, of whom, indeed, she is extremely fond, Mrs. Brand ushers her down the staircase and through the hall.

CHAPTER XI.

It is a still, calm evening. Nadine had stayed rather later than usual with Millicent; and now, though still a lingering, tender daylight illumines all the world, the stars are coming timidly into the pale sky—one by one, and very slowly, yet with a gentle persistency that soon bids fair to deck the heavens with these glittering gems.

She is feeling a little troubled, a little sick at heart, both for herself and for her friend—a little tired, too, of all things. Making her way into St. James' Park, she loiters there beneath the trees, some sense of comfort springing up within her from the very feeling of the turf beneath her feet, the rustling of the branches overhead.

Alas! what a complicated thing is life! How small a share of gladness goes to such an armful of regret! Even money cannot smooth one's path. Poor Millicent! To wed one man while her heart is given to another. Oh, it is wrong—it is wicked! No woman should dare to so play with her happiness. Millicent should pause—should give herself time to weigh the matter before bartering forever the best that life can offer. She (Nadine) will reason with her—will entreat—compel——

Suddenly she stops short in her impassioned determination, and a little chill runs through her. Is *she* the one to warn, to condemn?—She! There is love in her heart, indeed; but is it for the man she has promised to marry—or for——?

She grows deadly pale. A shudder runs through her slight frame. Two large tears force themselves from beneath her reluctant lids, and travel slowly down her white cheeks. Almost as they fall upon her clasped hands a voice sounds in her ear.

"Taking advantage of this charming evening?" says Mr. Duran in his low, kind accents. "I sometimes—indeed, very often—feel like you. That is, I would gladly walk about beneath the spreading trees, instead of going through the more prosaic work of dining."

He is smiling down at her. If he had noticed those two

luckless tears, or the brilliant blush that has greeted his arrival, no one could guess it, by the trained indifference of his manner and his perfectly careless air. Underneath his loose coat she can see that he is dressed in evening clothes, and a wonder as to what has brought him from the region of clubs to this lonely part of the park seizes upon her.

"I have just left Miss Grey. And it looked so sweet in here. A sudden longing to feel myself even so far removed from the noise and bustle of the town induced me to turn aside for a little while." The words come from her nervously, in a halting fashion. How can she be sure he has not seen those tell-tale tears? "But you?" she says, with a swift glance at him. She pauses; her words nevertheless contain a question.

"I saw you," returns he, simply. "It occurred to me I should like to say good-evening to you."

He smiles very kindly here. And though his tone is carefully kept within the lines of commonplaceness, still truth will not be denied; and something in it brings a warm, rich flush to the girl's face. Duran, looking at her always in a semi-conscious way, loses himself in a contemplation of her fairness. She is dressed in a pale-blue linen gown, exquisitely made, that suits her to admiration. It is prinked out with dainty little bows, and soft foldings of lace here and there. There is no suggestion of poverty or poorness of any sort about her. There is, indeed, no necessity in Nadine's life for any extreme economy; and the girl herself so well portrays the breeding she possesses, that it would be impossible for her to look anything but well-gowned and the gentlewoman that she is.

Perhaps Duran is hardly aware of the length and strength of his regard. The perfect profile, the proud little mouth —proud, yet sweet withal; the curling lashes, the low, broad forehead; the delicacy of the tinted skin—nothing is lost to him. The most brilliant reception-rooms of those he knows—and they are of the best—could not show a fairer—nay, *so fair* a face as this upon which he now is gazing in the soft, seductive twilight.

The roar of the town comes to them, yet they seem far from it. The shadows of the trees are growing thicker—evening wanes. With a start Duran rouses himself from his reverie to note these facts—to note, too, that the girl has been speaking to him, and that he has given her no answer.

"I think I must say good-by to you," she is saying now coldly enough, as though a little piqued. If he will not listen to her; if his thoughts are dwelling upon—upon other people, why, then, it is as well she took her homeward way. "Do not let me keep you any longer, Mr. Duran."

She holds out her hand to him.

"You are not keeping me—and yet, after all, perhaps you are," returns he, still a little dreamily. "And you are right. It does grow late—too late for a little girl like you to be out, and alone."

"I am very often out—and always alone," says Nadine, gently; "but I am quite safe—quite."

"To-night, at all events," says he, "because I am here to see you home."

"Oh, no. Please do not dream of it!" exclaims she, earnestly; "you know you have not had your dinner yet."

"It is only seven; and I have dined early," says Duran, laughing. "Besides, I shall not lose it—one charm those much-abused clubs possess lies in the knowledge that they will give one a dinner at any hour. Now, if I were married——"

He stops here rather abruptly; and his eyes meet hers as though she had something to do with his hesitation. Then he recovers himself.

"If you were married I suppose you would not want a club—or—'dinner at any hour,'" she says, quietly.

A quick light flashes into Duran's eyes. Married! to the woman he loves! She is right—there would be no need of a club then.

"But as it is, good-night, Mr. Duran."

She holds out her hand.

"You would dismiss me. But I will not so easily be got rid of," says Duran, lightly, yet rather tremulously. "I want nothing—I would have you believe this—but to be here—or anywhere—with you."

All the color fades from the girl's face. She grows pale as death. Almost for a moment it seems to him that she is on the point of fainting.

"Go!" she says, through her white lips—indistinctly, yet with an anguish of entreaty that sounds through her low utterance.

"I cannot," returns Duran, resolutely, taking her hand and covering it with both his own. "How can I when my heart is here? I love you, Nadine. I have loved you

for many a day. Why should I not say so to you now—here? Why should I not ask you to-night to be my——"

"Oh, no! oh, *no!*" Putting her disengaged hand against his breast, she makes a movement as though to push him from her. He had thought her pale before, but now she is livid, and out of the ghost-like face the great, eager, despairing eyes shine with a miserable brightness. There is something about her whole manner not to be misunderstood. This is no maiden coyness—it is rather the agony of a woman.

Duran, in his turn, feels his color fade.

"There is another?" he says, quietly.

"Yes."

"He loves you?"

"He has told me so."

"It is Granit Boyle," cries he, with a sudden flash of comprehension or recollection—he hardly knows which—turning upon her a glance that seems to burn into her very soul.

"Granit Boyle? No. Why, he is engaged to Miss Grey," she says, in a dull tone. Her very heart at this moment seems dead within her. She is singularly cold and calm.

"And—and this other loves you, you say?" continues Mr. Duran, flinging Boyle out of the discussion, and returning to the thought that has overpowered him and killed the glad hope that, day by day, for months, has been steadily growing up within him.

"I have already told you," says Nadine.

Sweet Heaven! What an hour is this! What has she done? What crime committed to deserve it?

"And you love him?"

He has laid his hands upon her shoulders and forced her to face him. She is looking up into his eyes—the grave, kind, loving eyes that at this supreme moment she knows are all the world to her.

"I have promised to marry him," she replies, gravely and with a simple dignity that disarms him. He lets his hands drop from her shoulders.

"I am too late in the field, it appears," he says, bitterly. "And, after all, I dare say I never had a chance. How old are you?" The question is so abrupt that it would have startled her had she been in her every-day humor; but now feeling is killed.

"Twenty."

"And I am thirty-five. Quite an old man to you, I dare say." He laughs a short, harsh little laugh that touches her more keenly than anything he has said.

"I have never thought of you as old," she says, the words coming from her hastily, involuntarily. He seizes upon them.

"Then you *have* thought of me? I have had some room in your heart?" he cries, with such a cruel longing in his voice that her strength dies from her. She looks at him. Their eyes meet. She can see all the love and grief in his; and what is it he sees in hers? Whatever it may be, it induces him to hold out his arms to her.

"Nadine! hear me—give me a chance!" he cries.

But she shrinks from him.

"Is this generous? Is this honest?" she murmurs, in a stifled tone; then, "Oh, go, go, *go!*"

She turns away from him. He would have followed her, but she waves him back by an impetuous movement of her hand, and hurries through the gloom of the descending evening. Darkness has fallen suddenly. However it may be with them—and indeed hope at this moment lies dead—he cannot let her wander alone at so late an hour with that look of passionate sorrow in her eyes.

He follows her. Having reached her, he lays a hand upon her arm and bears mutely the glance of reproach she turns upon him.

"Do not be afraid. I will not again distress you. But I cannot leave you alone at this hour. Come, I will take you home."

"If you would *only* leave me," she says wearily.

"Bear with me for a while. It will not be for long," says Duran, with such tender comprehension that she covers her face with her hands and breaks into bitter weeping.

"Is it so hard to bear? There! cry on—it will do you good," he says, gently. When she has grown a little calmer, he draws her hand through his arm, and leads her back to where once more the roll of wheels beats more vehemently upon the ear. "I must know that you are safe," he says then. "Grant me that comfort, at least. I promise you I will not open my lips to you from this until I see you in your mother's house. Let me take you there."

A slight pressure of the fingers on his arm is all the answer he receives; but it is enough for him. Calling a passing hansom, he puts her into it, and quickly follows.

True to his word, however, he refrains from addressing her until she reaches her home, and even then, merely utters the formal good-night, as he gives the man his orders to take him back to town and drop him in Pall Mall.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE thing is how to discover him. Those fellows nowadays are so difficult to unearth, and our detective system so painfully inefficient."

"I don't want him," says Millicent, who is looking very pretty and fragile in her invalid gown of white cashmere and lace. "I only want my sapphires. I was saying to auntie only this morning what a very remarkable thing it is, that both Lady Valworth—your mother—and I should have been made a prey of burglars."

"Odd! The same thought struck me only this morning," says Granit, showing all his white teeth as he smiles. ("What a *bite* he could give," thinks his *protégée*, watching him.) "Quite a coincidence, eh? But it must be acknowledged your loss is even greater than hers. Those sapphires were unrivalled, and will fetch a high price anywhere."

"Your loss too, Granit," says Mrs. Brand. "Your future wife"—with a smile at Millicent—"will lose a little of her *prestige* now she has ceased to be the possessor of these famous jewels."

"My future wife," says Granit, gracefully, "will not need the addition of any jewels to make her the most beautiful woman in England."

"Ye gods!" cries Miss Grey, springing suddenly to her feet, and rushing across the room to a mirror. "Am I that? The most beautiful woman in England! Am I that, now, my good Granit? Or is it the fact of being your wife that will make me so?"

"Now, of course. And then, too, I hope."

"Wrong now, at all events, my friend," after an exhaustive examination of her pretty form in the mirror. "I know someone at this very moment who is unspeakably better worth looking at than I am."

"Lady Landing?"

"No! I prefer myself to her. I was thinking of my little friend—my youthful instructress—Nadine Roche.

By the bye, what a singular thing that you have never seen her."

"Quite as singular that she has never seen me."

"She did—once."

Boyle turns straight round and looks at her. He had been teasing the parrot up to this. Though he does not speak, something in his face compels her to answer him as though he had done so.

"Yes—once, really; so you are not as unknown to fame as you imagine."

"She told you so?"

"She confessed as much. But, as you seem modest about it, perhaps it will comfort you to learn that what she did see was only the back of your head, and a bit of your nose. You know, if you *will* wear your nose so long you cannot expect it to altogether escape observation."

Granit laughs.

"So that was all she saw? She can have no idea then what a good-looking fellow I am," he says, with a mischievous shrug.

"Not the slightest. Your persistent refusal to oblige all your admirers by sitting to a photographer has put it out of my power to give Nadine some faint idea of your charms."

"Just as well; she might have been overpowered by them," returns Granit, who has gone back to his task of reducing the parrot to a state of frenzy.

"Not that I believe in photographs," goes on Millicent. "There is Letty Lumsden, she looks like a Venus on cardboard—like a dairy-maid in the flesh."

"To say nothing of Mrs. Denby, who looks like a saint in the flesh, and like a Bacchante, as portrayed by Dessemains. I'm rather glad I'm out of it. I rejoice to think my face is still my own. Photos"—with a curious little laugh—"are dangerous."

"If every one thought *that*, the detectives would be oftener at fault than they are," says Mrs. Brand. "Photographs have been the means of bringing many criminals to justice."

"As I have said—they are dangerous," replies her nephew.

"I wish we had some picture of the wretch who has robbed Millicent."

"But you see you haven't."

"You take it very easily—yet you must regret the jew-

els, Granit," says Mrs. Brand, fretfully, who is of opinion that nothing now should be thought of but the irreparable loss her niece has sustained, and who regards the present frivolling as being distinctly in bad taste, considering all things. Indeed, she would have considered it hardly out of place if some one had pulled down the blinds and put muffling on the knocker.

"I assure you I do not regret them. I have nothing to regret," returns he, laughing lightly. Then he looks at Millicent. "How can I find room for regret when I see my cousin safe and well?"

Millicent is as touched by his manner as it would be possible for him to move her.

"Certainly he bears the loss of those jewels very well," she says to herself; "and he used to be their most extravagant admirer. Sometimes it irritated me to think he looked upon them with a proprietorial eye, but after all I believe I wronged him. If they were still in my possession or in his he could not be more unconcerned."

She gives him a little kindly glance as a reward for this, which seems to afford him some secret amusement.

"The thing that puzzles me," goes on Mrs. Brand, who cannot keep her mind off the subject, "is how the miscreant got in. Certainly Brown confesses he is not in the habit of putting up the chain at night—a most reprehensible habit, for which I have severely censured him; but, admitting that, I do not see how the burglar could have had a door-key exactly like ours. It is one of a most peculiar pattern; poor Mr. Brand quite prided himself on it."

"The more peculiar the easier to take an impression of it," says Granit.

"To take an impression? to get a false key made? But that means you would suspect the servants. I could not do that; they are all old servants—old friends, indeed, I might almost say."

"You are like my mother. She will not believe the servants were implicated in the diamond robbery at Valworth; yet if she had taken my advice a recovery might have been effected. Mind, I do not say it would," says Captain Boyle, who seems determined to give every one a chance; "I only say it *might*."

"But—but surely you would not attach suspicion to Brown?" says Mrs. Brand, nervously, who is easily swayed.

"There are other servants in the house besides Brown; and people come and go—eh?"

"No one comes and goes except Miss Roche; you would not suspect her, I suppose?" says Millicent, coldly.

"I really could not form an opinion. You forget I have not had the pleasure of an introduction to Miss Roche."

There is a slight return of his sneering tone here—the tone that had driven her to passionate anger during that interview at the last dance she had attended. She has seen fit to forget that scene, and so has he; but just now she is strongly reminded of it. Mrs. Brand, scenting mischief in the air, comes to the rescue.

"Tut," says she, "what an absurd question to arise! let Miss Roche's name alone. I must say, Millicent, you show but questionable taste when you drag your little friend's name into such an affair. I could tell you something more to the purpose, but mum, mum, mum is the word."

"Oh, auntie, you have heard something!" cries Millicent, pouncing down upon her. "You have had news, and, naughty woman that you are, you have hidden it from me. Come, out with it! Your blood will be upon your own head if you delay for another moment."

"But I assure you, my dearest girl——"

"Your dearest girl is disgusted with your duplicity. Come, speak, I say. One, two—*three* will be your death signal. Granit, do you take no interest in the proceedings? Are you not longing to hear of the capture of the capturer of my sapphires?"

She is kneeling beside Mrs. Brand, having thrown her arms coaxingly around her, so cannot see Granit's face, but she can hear his laugh.

"Yes; let us know what kind of a fellow he is," he says.

"Nonsense! Of course it has not come to that yet, but there is a clew—a strong clew! And oddly enough, the detective tells me they believe our burglar is the very one who had a hand in abstracting your mother's diamonds"—she is speaking now to Boyle; "THAT struck me as being very remarkable."

"Looks as if it was someone connected with the family. You will bear me out that I have all along directed attention to the servants," says Granit. "It is a thousand pities this clever detective of yours was not called in at the Valworth affair. I blame myself very much for recommending Simpson, who really did nothing, so far as I can hear."

"They are attaching a good deal of importance to the handkerchief Dr. Thesby took into his possession. They have discovered something about that."

"Indeed. It was a common handkerchief, I think you told me."

"Quite coarse."

"Well, you could hardly expect a burglar to have a cambric one."

Granit seems amused.

"*My* burglar was not a common man, whatever your mother's may have been," interposes Millicent. "His voice I cannot describe, because it was distinctly feigned; but something in his whole air forbade the thought that he was of the lower classes. I cannot explain; I must only ask you to try to understand and follow me."

"The miscreant!" ejaculates Mrs. Brand, indignantly.

"In spite of all I really confess to a feeling of sentimental regard for him," says Millicent, gayly. "He might have murdered me, but he refrained; and he was so far removed from any suspicion of meanness that he actually forced a gift upon me ere he left. Consider that, auntie, and be more lenient in your abuse."

"I dare say you will persuade yourself by degrees that he fell in love with you," says Mrs. Brand, who is a little offended at any jesting on so solemn a subject.

"And why not, then? Am I not of a presence sufficiently noble to inthrall this modern Turpin?" Miss Grey demands this saucily of her aunt. "Look out for your laurels, Granit, there is a rival in the field."

"I know it, if you allude to Massareene," replies he in a whisper, too low for Mrs. Brand to hear.

Miss Grey colors vividly.

"You mistake," she says, coldly. "I was alluding to the burglar."

"Ah! Of *him* I could never feel jealous," returns he, easily. "Of that you may be positively certain."

He is still regarding her with a gleam of sarcastic amusement in his eyes that puzzles her and baffles her to read, when the door is thrown open and Mr. Massareene is announced.

CHAPTER XIII.

The young man hurries forward—forgetful of Mrs. Brand, etiquette, common politeness, everything—to where Millicent is standing. His face is pale, his eyes brilliant. He is evidently suffering from intense excitement.

"Miss Grey! what terrible thing is this I have heard? But you are well—safe?"

He is holding her hand tightly clasped in both his, and is gazing into her rather pink face with an eager love and solicitude not to be misunderstood. He is as oblivious to Captain Boyle's sneering laugh as to Mrs. Brand's glance of surprised displeasure, and is, indeed, deaf and blind to everything but Millicent herself. She has been in such sore danger; but now she is here, before him, well, beautiful as ever.

"Quite safe as you see," says Millicent, in a low, soft tone—the softest she has ever used to him. She cannot but contrast the tender vehemence of his address with the cool, unimpassioned greeting accorded to her by Granit an hour before. "You must not think of me any longer as deserving of your pity. And—have you forgotten auntie?"

Is there the faintest pressure of her cool little hand as she brings him thus back to a sense of his duty?

"How d'ye do, Mr. Massareene?" says Mrs. Brand, a slight touch of asperity in her tone.

There is something about this big, ugly young Irishman, with his musical brogue, and his wonderful eyes, and his impetuosity, that labels him dangerous.

"I *beg* your pardon!" he exclaims now, striding across the room and clasping Mrs. Brand's jewelled hand in a grasp warm as though he considered himself her prime favorite, rather than a *bête noir*. The grasp, however, as she does not fail to remark, though warm, is gentle in the extreme, and does not force the rings against the delicate skin. After all—yes—there are some commendable points about this young, ineligible man. "I have been unpardonably rude," goes on the ugly detrimental. "But you will forgive me, Mrs. Brand, when I assure you that I didn't know whether I was standing on my head or my heels when I entered the room. I never got such a shock in my life as Brandon gave me in the Junior a quarter of an hour ago."

"You were on your heels. That I can prove to you," says Mrs. Brand, smiling; she is too good-natured not to be half amused, half touched by the young man's evident concern.

"I am witness," puts in Granit, showing all his teeth again. "You were quite in proper trim, my dear fellow! Not a suspicion of intoxication about you."

This laugh is replete with insolence. In fact, the re-

mark just made has reference to a subject that has grown sore from rough handling. It has reference to a little scene in the early town life of Gerald Massareene, who, one evening, going a little off his head after the termination of a triumphant Derby Day, took perhaps a little more champagne than was good for him. Some—his friends—said it was only his usual excellent spirits raised to an excited pitch because of his having made a good thing off the winner. Others—his acquaintances (he had no enemies, good lad that he was)—said it was the excellent spirits of the club cellar. However it was, Massareene went considerably beyond bounds, and was in the morning thoroughly ashamed of himself. Then came his introduction to Millicent Grey—almost a little girl at that time, but old enough to inthrall and hold him with her budding beauty. And with his growing love for her grew his fear that this one episode (vulgar episode, he called it) should be made known to her. It was an absurd fear, of course, and arose more from an apprehension that she would regard him with disgust, than from any very moral regret for his misconduct; but, be that as it may, Granit Boyle knew of his nervous horror of its being known—and for the matter of that so did Millicent, who had heard of the little affair a long time ago, and had laughed a good deal at several of the smaller details concerning it. Indeed, it had been a very innocent offence from first to last.

At Granit's words Massareene's face flames, and a sudden fire brightens his eyes. At the moment it is easy to see that there is little love lost between the two men.

"You mean?" says Massareene, a little sharply, taking a step forward.

"Just what I said, dear boy—that you were eminently sober. Could I have borne higher testimony to your character? Miss Grey—as you seem to have some doubts about the accuracy of my statement—will, I am sure, corroborate what I have just said."

"I refuse to give my countenance to anything you may chance to say," returns Millicent, in a low tone, but with flashing eyes.

She has understood the drift of her cousin's remarks, and bitterly resents them. She may not be overkind always to Massareene, but she will permit no one else to be uncivil to him.

"What!" cries Boyle, gayly, arching his brows and lifting his shoulders in a foreign fashion that either belongs to

him or has been cultivated to a nicety, "you disagree with me? You really think that our friend's extremely—er—*empressé* manner, his hurried entrance, etc.—meant—the—er—the *other* thing? Really, dear Massareene, I would not stand that if I were you. You look as if you would like to murder somebody"—with a light laugh—"that is the standing condition of your countrymen, eh? Why not call Miss Grey out?"

"Duelling is out of fashion, and one only horsewhips men," replies Massareene, meaningly, with his eyes fixed steadily upon his opponent.

"Oh, but a duel under such conditions—that cannot be out of fashion, as it has never yet come in. Why not set it? Be a leader of it! And a *tête-à tête* with Miss Grey, even in such equivocal circumstances, might not be altogether without its charm."

He throws out this last taunt quite airily—making even a slight movement of the hand that somehow adds to the aggressive impertinence of it.

Massareene throws up his head, as though scenting battle, and his face pales. Millicent, marking these signs of coming storm, enters the breach hastily.

"I do think, Granit," she says, glancing insolently at her cousin from beneath half-closed lids, "that when you try to be amusing you are the most unpardonable stupid person I ever met. Your jokes always make me feel inclined to weep."

"In this instance?" demands he, quickly, his face darkening and an evil light coming into his eyes.

"And in every other. One yawns enough in all conscience as one goes through life, without being compelled to do it by those who would fain believe they stir our laughter. Give it up, my dear Granit; comedy is beyond you—the heavy business suits you better."

A glance at her cousin convinces her that she has amply revenged herself. His brow is as black as midnight, and his mouth has taken the old expression that means mischief. Massareene, too, has added to his discomfiture by breaking into a gay laugh, that rouses Mrs. Brand from her perusal of a review, as scurrilous as it is just, of a book written by a friend of hers, that she finds of engrossing interest—the review, that is, not the book.

"What is it?" asks she, looking up in high good-humor. Really, the review has quite exceeded her expectations. "If it is anything amusing, pray let me hear it. I have

been *so* put out by a very harsh criticism on dear Fanny Ellwood's novel that I require something to cheer me. Some little jest of yours, Granit? Come, tell it to me, though I must say, my dear, you look more like an *Othello* this moment than one 'born in a merry hour.' Ah, here comes tea at last! Just move my chair a little, will you? Thanks, dear Granit. I am fast becoming an old woman, eh?"

Granit is in just such a pleasant mood as urges him to tell her she is already among the frosts and snows of life; but prudence—a feeling more powerful with him than most others—restrains him. He is obliged, however, to move her chair into the exact position pointed out, and to perform divers other small services for her with a smiling face, and apparently willing air, while grinding under the thought that he is leaving the other two free to carry on a low conversation uninterrupted.

"How angry you were about Granit's innuendo just now," whispers she, drawing her skirts aside that he may drop upon the low lounge beside her. "You need not have been. Did you think I never heard of that one little *fiasco* of yours, eh?"

She leans toward him and smiles a little. The young man starts and colors hotly. Yet her smile is so sweet, so kind—*never* has her manner been so replete with gentleness as now.

"You knew—you heard——" stammers he.

"Why yes. Was it such a mighty secret, such an awful crime? Did you think that I could not condone—forgive?"

She is still smiling on him, her beautiful eyes riveted upon his. Massareene's heart is beating passionately. He feels as if he can scarcely breathe—and yet he is breathing more freely than he has done for a long time, now that he knows she knows, and that after all she can tolerate him. Nay, it is surely more than toleration!

"You are an angel," murmurs he in turn. Oh! the rapture of this whispered conversation! The knowledge that they are—if not in body, at least in spirit—alone! "But it was my one offence. I pray you to believe that! Afterward I met you. And then—*then* it would have been impossible!"

Her color pales slightly as she looks into the loving eyes bent on hers. He has put out his hand in his earnestness and laid it upon hers—a strong hand, slightly browned, as

a man's should be, and very handsome. Somehow the strength of it appeals to her. Is its owner like it—firm, resolute? He has, at all events, been almost obstinately persistent in his courtship, clinging to hope when there was none to be seen anywhere, and steadfastly adhering to the belief that "all things come to him who knows how to wait." He is waiting still, though small chance of a reward seems to be his.

"There," she says, rallying with an effort, and compelling herself to meet his gaze, "you are pardoned, if pardon is what you want."

"I want more than that," says Mr. Massareene, who, having gained what he had not dared to hope for half an hour ago, now desires more. "I want——"

"Of that, another day," interrupts she, playfully. "When will you learn to be wise, Gerald?"

"When I marry you, my sweet Minerva."

"That will be never, then, I greatly doubt me."

"Still, there *is* a doubt, you see."

"To talk like this to me is waste of time."

"To talk to you could never be waste of time."

"Not if you talk sensibly."

"And sure, what can be more sensible than to tell you that I love you?" says the Irishman; "unless it would be your saying that you will take me for your husband?"

"That would mean throwing up friends and fortune."

"Just so! Then do it," says he.

What is to be done with a man like this? Millicent sighs. He is nearer victory at this moment than he knows himself to be. Miss Grey, glancing involuntarily at Granit, and then back again at him, mentally comes to the conclusion that any hope of happiness for her lies in an immediate surrender of all ties that bind her to the former. But auntie, and Uncle Timothy, and the world in general!

"Dear Gerald! I wish you would not speak to me like this," she says, softly. "You must know how useless it is."

"I never knew I had a nice name until I heard you say it," says the irrepressible Gerald, taking no notice of the substance of her speech. "It sounds like music. I'm awfully glad my mother christened me Gerald."

"Why? Do you think I could not pronounce any other name musically?" asks she, laughing in spite of herself.

"That's right. I like to hear you laugh," says he. "They say, in my country, that when a woman smiles the battle is won. And sometimes I think——"

"I will not listen to you," declares Miss Grey, beating her foot impatiently upon the carpet. "It is not kind—it is not right. You forget I am engaged to Captain Boyle."

"Bah! He doesn't count at all," says Massareene. "You *can't* marry such a fellow as that."

"What have you to say against him?" asks she, eagerly. Oh! if only some insurmountable obstacle could be shown.

"Why, nothing!" says Massareene. "Only he is such a"—he checks himself just in time—"such an uncomfortable sort of a fellow," he concludes, rather lamely.

"Tell me," says Miss Grey, in a very low tone; "you are a member of his club. And—I have heard—that is, they say—he—he gambles a good deal. Is this true?"

Mr. Massareene grows crimson.

"Oh! by Jove, you know! You can't expect me to answer questions about another man, and that man my rival," he says. "I—I didn't expect you would do that, you know."

"You won't tell me, then?" says she.

"I know nothing of his gambling. I know nothing at all to his discredit," says Massareene, slowly, his eyes on the ground.

"Then you would let me marry him to be made miserable—rather than sacrifice a certain sense of honor?" asks she, sorrowfully.

"You shouldn't tempt me like this!" exclaims he, with a sudden touch of passion. "The very knowledge that he is your accepted lover—at least, your future husband"—he makes his correction because of a little deprecatory gesture on her part—"and that I—even apart from that fact—hate him, compels me to silence. And—and even suppose he does gamble a bit heavily now and then, why—he may give that up when—when he is married," says Massareene, stumbling over the hateful sentence, and trying to be as just to his rival as nature will permit him.

"I see," says Millicent. She is silent for quite two minutes—a long time when one is waiting anxiously for the next word. "I have heard," she says, now very seriously, "that he plays for such high stakes that he is often at his wit's end to know how to meet his debts of honor—so called. Hearing this has led me to the belief that he is marrying me more as a means of gaining money to carry on his play, than from any higher motive."

"There you wrong him," says Massareene, eagerly. "He is no defaulter, whatever else he may be. He lost a

tremendous sum to Black, of the Blues, about two months ago; but he paid up far sooner than Black ever expected. And he has given an I O U to Burnaby, to pay him next month, and—" He stops short. "Lots of fellows play pretty high before they settle down," he says, a great generosity compelling him to say an exculpatory word for the man who is, perhaps, the only living thing he detests.

"I quite understand," returns Millicent, slowly. "It is very good of you; but only what I expected. There is, however, one thing that puzzles me—where my cousin got the money to pay that tremendous sum to Colonel Black."

"You probably know more of his private concerns than I do," says Massareene, carelessly. "He always appears to me to have plenty of money. Enough of him, however. There is something that concerns me, that I would tell you. You know my uncle, Lord Ballymore? Well, last night he said he would allow me £300 a year in addition to my present income, which is five, you know, if—if you would have me. He admires you very much."

"And hates Granit a good deal more! I know all about that old story, and do not blame Lord Ballymore for his dislike of my excellent cousin."

"You don't think you could do it on the eight hundred?" asks the young man, wistfully.

Miss Grey's ears are well trained, and now she hears a step approaching—oh! so softly!

"One never thinks nowadays—there is no time," she says, in a clear, distinct tone. "Tea, Granit? Thanks. No; nothing else, thank you; unless, indeed, it be one of those little wafers that auntie seems so meanly determined to keep all to herself."

Granit hastens to obey her command.

"A last word," says Massareene, quickly. "Do you know Miss Duran?"

"Mr. Duran's aunt? Yes."

"Well, and so do I. She receives every Wednesday. If —if I could be only sure that she would receive *you* next Wednesday!" He has risen, and is gazing down at her, his heart in his eyes.

"Why—if you are there, you will see," returns she, with a light laugh, as Granit again approaches.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mr. Duran's house in Berkeley Square is presided over by his aunt—a little, thin, wiry, kindly old lady, with corkscrew ringlets, and a high, peaky nose. Her acquaintances are as old-fashioned as her curls, but it is amazing how many she has of them. They are of the staid, eminently respectable order, all able to count their generations, and all "carriage people." Yet it might be admitted that sometimes Miss Duran pines for the young and frivolous, and would be glad to welcome them inside her nephew's doors—*her* doors, as they might be called, so little does he interfere with her arrangements, and so seldom does he show himself between twelve A.M. and eleven P.M.

Her grandniece, the little Clytie, is an everlasting joy to her ; but then, a child of six cannot gossip, or have a love affair—and love affairs are dear to the soul of the guileless Miss Duran. Clytie's visiting governess, Miss Roche, is more after her heart ; but then Nadine can so seldom be with her, and is always so shy and nervous and anxious to be gone the moment her pupil's lessons have come to an end.

In vain has Miss Duran besought her to stay on Wednesdays, and help her to receive her visitors. Nadine has always had some pressing engagement on hand, or else a headache, and, indeed, has so persistently declined to stay, that Miss Duran has given up asking her. Poor child ! had she known that Mr. Duran would rather have died than undergo one of the heavy afternoons consecrated to the reception of his aunt's ancient friends, she might perhaps have suffered less from headaches on Wednesdays, and have had far fewer of the pressing engagements. But, as it is, Miss Duran is left to entertain her staid friends as best she may : good, elderly folk, principally country people, who would not have foregone their season for anything, because it was the correct thing to come to town when the roses were blooming in the lovely country, in the days of their fathers, and therefore must be the correct thing now. There are a few town-bred people among them—also of the heavy order—and here and there a sedate girl (by courtesy, so called), and here and there an old-young man. But, as a rule, Miss Duran's friends are calculated to make one yawn.

On this particular Wednesday quite a stir and bustle of the thick silken skirts takes place, as Gerald Massareene, smiling and gay, enters Miss Duran's drawing-room. There is, in spite of the debonnair manner that distinguishes him, and induces all the old-young men to look askance at him, and grow green with envy, and that causes the quiet old men to wink and nudge each other, and call him "a sad dog"—a suspicion of anxiety that renders his kind eyes melancholy, and makes him a favorite at once with all the gentle, elderly women.

He is a fashionable-looking young man, exquisitely dressed, and is, in fact, such a departure from Miss Duran's drawing-room, that he creates an immense sensation, that is only to be surpassed by the entrance of a lovely young woman ten minutes afterward, who sweeps up to Miss Duran with the most charming smile in the world on her beautiful face.

"Dear Miss Duran," she says, slipping her little gray-clad hand into that of the astonished spinster, "we have been wanting to come and see you for *such* a time—auntie and I—but there have been so many other tiresome engagements. And, after all, it is better, is it not, to leave the best to the last?" this with a swift glance at Massareene that sets his heart a-beating. "Even now, we could not come together; there was some absurd crush somewhere, and we had promised to go, so I told auntie I wanted to see you even more than she did; so I packed her off to *her* afternoon, and I came to mine."

Her low *trainante* voice, her pretty smile, the gentle pressure of the little hand, all won Miss Duran's heart at once. She had met Millicent two or three times, but now she persuades herself that they have been good friends for many years. What a lovely creature! How nice of her to come to this dull old house, just to see a stupid old maid! Dear, dear me, there were not many who would do that!

Meantime, the "lovely creature" is taking her tea from Gerald Massareene's hands. Tea of an exquisite flavor and rich with country cream, sent up specially from the heart of Hampshire for Miss Duran's Tuesdays. Tea, served in priceless old Crown Derby, before which the modern imitations might hold down their heads.

"Sugar?" asks Gerald in a society tone; and then, considerably lower, "*my own darling!*"

"Eh?" says Miss Grey in return to this impassioned address, with a startling promptitude that is rather dispiriting.

In truth, having got here, no matter how, and so acknowledged to Massareene that she has thought it worth her while to give up for his sake one of the most brilliant concerns of the season, she is a little frightened, a little impatient, and yet a good deal glad.

"Millicent," says Gerald, dropping into the chair near her, "that you have come at all is so much more than I dared hope for that I would now entreat you to let my joy continue by being kind to me for the short hour we may be together."

His tone is very sad, in spite of the joy he mentions. Old Miss Duran, looking kindly at the two young people who have descended into her midst and cast such a cloud of sunshine upon the dull stately drawing-room, reads as clearly as though it were all in print before her, that this young man—the son of her dead cousin—is breaking his heart for love of the pretty, slender girl staring so solemnly into her tea-cup, and that the pretty girl is not altogether indifferent about it.

"Bless me! And I hear she is to be married to that nephew of Lucy Brand's. Well, to judge by her face, I should say her heart is not in it. Poor young things! evidently they have entered into the blissful realms of love. Cupid's darts have found a lodging in their tender breasts!" Sometimes Miss Duran, in spite of the ringlets, indulged in flights of poetic fancy. "How romantic! How full of pathos! That dear boy!—why I can see him dwindling away before my eyes. Quite a wreck he is becoming, though art and his tailor may try to delude me. Well, I must see what can be done. Gerald, my dear, do you think Miss Grey would like to see that painting of your great-grandfather that adorns the west wall of the library? It is well worth a visit, I assure you, my dear Miss Grey. Do let Gerald persuade you to look at it. A masterpiece, I assure you. One of Lely's brightest efforts!"

"Come!" says Gerald, in a low, entreating tone.

Millicent hesitates for a moment, and then, according to custom, is lost.

She rises, gives her cup to him to lay upon a table near, and with a bright smile and glance directed to her hostess, follows him out of the room.

Although his spirits have risen almost beyond his control, Mr. Massareene behaves himself wonderfully until the hall is crossed and the library gained. Then, I regret to say, he considerably forgets himself. He throws honor to

the winds, and taking Granit Boyle's *fiancée* in his arms, strains her to his heart.

"Darling of my heart!" whispers he, with a sigh of passionate gladness.

At Miss Grey's conduct on this occasion I am also bound to express regret. Instead of the indignation she should have shown, she simply pushes him away from her with a very lenient hand, and laughs a little.

"Was there ever such a bad boy!" says she, standing back from him with palm extended to keep him off "Are you totally without grace?"

"On the contrary, I am filled with it! I have gained—you."

"Gained?"

"Millicent, will you tell me now that I am nothing to you?"

"Certainly not; you are always, as I hope, my very good friend!"

"I am not. I am your lover, or nothing."

"It is not good for a woman to have two lovers."

"Call Boyle a lover? Pshaw!" says Mr. Massareene with fine contempt. "Compare him with me, and where are you?"

"Why *here!*" says she, laughing. And then all at once her gayety comes to an end, and her face clouds. "Alas!" cries she, "what is to be the end of it all?"

"St. George's, Hanover Square," returns he, with undiminished courage.

"Yes; with Granit as bridegroom."

"With me, you mean. Sweetheart, why can you not break all these chains that bind you, and give yourself as your heart directs?"

Miss Grey has subsided into tears, and a big chair.

"If I only dared," sobs she from behind her handkerchief.

At this half admission Mr. Massareene's hope rises forty-fold.

"If you dared—what then?" he asks, kneeling beside her and possessing himself of one dainty hand.

"I might—learn—what happiness really means."

"With me, you mean?"

"O Gerald!" whispers she; and then it is all over and she is caught to his breast, and for a little while the world is forgotten by both.

Being the woman, she is the first to awake from the happy dream.

"It is madness!" she says, lifting her head and gazing at him with tearful eyes.

"Not if you will trust to me. Not if you are sure that you honestly love me. Speak to me, Millicent! Why do you turn your head away? You *do* love me?"

At this she lets her gaze return to his.

"I wish I had never seen you," she says with trembling lips.

"That is a hard speech, my darling!"

"It is true, though. If I had never seen you, I might have been willing to conclude this contract with Granit. If I had never seen you, I could never have——"

"Go on."

"Loved you!"

She bows her head upon her hands and bursts into fresh tears.

Mr. Massareene draws her head down upon his shoulder.

"Don't cry like that, Millicent," says he. "It will all come right in the end. Something tells me so." Something tells him quite the reverse; but he would not be the true lover he is, if he could not strain a point to please his beloved. "What we have got to do now is to think what is the first, best step to be taken."

"The first, best step will mean ruin."

There is a touch of impatience in her tone. Although she loves him, it is hard for her to give up the gilded loaves and fishes of fashionable life.

"It will not," retorts he stoutly; "it will mean emancipation—if you have the pluck to go through with it."

"Oh! emancipation!" says she disdainfully, though she is glad of his resoluteness. "All you Irishmen are mad about freedom! One would think you were a land-leaguer, the way you speak! I wonder you are not afraid to love one of the hated Sassenachs."

"I am not afraid of anything, except your strength of mind. You are mine now, but will you be mine an hour hence?"

"If I were a man," says Miss Grey reflectively, "I should not choose to fall in love with a woman upon whom I could place no dependence."

"If I were a woman," responds he promptly, "I should know better than to marry one man when I loved another."

"Well, but you are not a woman," says she triumphantly.

"Neither are you a man," replies he. "That squares

our accounts. Sweetheart," regarding her very gravely, "tell me at least that you will think seriously of my proposal."

"I am always thinking of it," returns she, sighing. "Oh! why are not you Granit?"

"The gods forbid!" says he, piously. "I am a better man as I stand, though no doubt a poorer one. Well, however the wind blows, I am a happier fellow to-day than I ever expected to be. I have heard from your own lips that you love me."

"Do not place too much confidence in that."

"You will not deny the truth of it, however?"

"No. It is true. You are more to me, Gerald, than any man I ever have met—than any man I ever shall meet."

Her eyes grow large and dim with tears. She holds out her hand to him.

"Strengthened by such an assurance, I will believe in nothing less than victory," replies he, in a clear, resonant voice, his face bright with a hope that at this moment has grown into a certainty.

Millicent, watching him, feels her heart grow sad. "Will not the weight of circumstances, of custom, prove too strong for him?"

"I must go home," she says, starting a little. "I must go and say good-by to that dear little cousin of yours, who looks so like a fairy godmother. She has acted the part, too, has she not? Did she know when she sent us here?"

"Not from me. Not from anyone, I think. But she has bright eyes, and perhaps mine betrayed me."

"At all events she was very good to us," says Millicent, gratefully. "Come, take me back to her."

"Good-by, then, for the present, darling," whispers he, proudly. He draws her to him and looks down anxiously into her face. A question seems hovering on his lips. At last he gives it words. "Do—do you ever kiss *him?*" asks he in a jerky, vehement way that speaks of suppressed agony.

"Never!" returns she, almost as vehemently.

She flushes crimson. Massareene's arms tighten round her, and an expression of unspeakable relief alters his face.

"I cannot tell you how often I have thought of that, how it has preyed upon me," he exclaims, eagerly. "And

after all, the torment I endured had no foundation." He looks tenderly down upon her. "My love, you seem more mine now than ever!" Then his tone changes, and an accent of scorn unmitigated runs through it. Evidently his thoughts are wandering to some one absent. "What sort of a fellow was he at all?" says he, with a curl of his lips.

A faint smile breaks through the sadness of Millicent's face.

"Would you have had him different, then?" she asks, with a slight return of her usual gayety.

"Different! Do you know," says he, presently, "that I don't think I dislike him now half as much as I did five minutes ago." Then, pressing his cheek to hers, and speaking in a much lower tone, and rather shyly, "Millicent, will you be kinder to me than you are to him?"

"Have I not been kinder?" asks she, faintly.

"But kinder—kinder still."

She lifts her face to his!

CHAPTER XV.

"WELL, my dear, and what did you think of the portrait?" asks little Miss Duran, beaming upon Millicent, as she and Massareene re-enter the room. Good, eh?"

"The portrait!" says Massareene, seeing the look of stupefaction on Millicent's face. The fact is, they had forgotten all about the masterpiece. He rushes to the assistance of his beloved. "Oh, of course," he exclaims, with a wonderful access of enthusiasm. "It was excellent. Miss Grey thought it the very image of him!"

"Eh?" says Miss Duran, resettling her spectacles upon her nose, and glancing blankly from Gerald to Miss Grey, and back again. This scrutiny has evidently no effect so far as elucidation of his meaning goes.

"The very *image* of him," repeats Gerald, impressively.

"I think, my dear Gerald, you are making a mistake somewhere," suggests the little spinster, mildly. "Miss Grey could hardly be a judge of the points of the likeness, as the good man must have been dead and buried before she was born."

"True! true!" exclaims Gerald, growing confused. "What I mean is that I told Miss Grey that *I* could vouch for the excellence of the portraiture."

"Hardly, I think, my dear boy," persists Miss Duran, getting each moment more mystified, "considering you, too, were unknown when your great-grandfather was borne to his tomb."

"Ah! just so," says Gerald, falling deeper into it. "I *told* you you were at fault somewhere; what I would have you know is, that we both think if we *had* known that respected ancestor of mine, we would have thought it a capital likeness."

This is too much even for Miss Duran. She falls back a little, and Massareene makes his escape. Millicent long since has subsided into a huge arm-chair, and is chatting gayly to an elderly matron, who is receiving her advances with caution, not being entirely sure as to whether this innovation of Miss Duran's is an actress or a peeress. She is very much exercised in her mind about it, as, if a peeress, she is treating her with impolitic coldness, if an actress, with too much familiarity. Altogether the elderly guest is having a very bad time of it.

By this time Miss Duran has recovered herself, and a dim perception of the truth flashes upon her. The glimpse, which after all is pretty near the truth, delights her. Dear creatures, of course they were so taken up with each other they had no time to think of worn-out portraits of the dead and gone. It was natural, most natural. To-day, with their love, is the hour of dawn. (Here the old lady is mistaken.) To-morrow may see the perfecting of it. She quite glows on Massareene from over her kindly glasses, and tells herself it is as good as one of the grand old romances, when cavaliers of the type of Jock o' Hazeldean took the "law and the lady" into their own hands, and were over the border with both before the breakfast-bell rang.

Millicent is still struggling with the ancient dame, who is every moment growing more and more terrified, when a little clear ringing laugh is heard upon the corridor without.

"Good-by, good-by," cries a sweet, childish voice, and now an instant later a tiny form, exquisitely dressed in white cambric and lace, rushes tumultuously into the room and precipitates itself upon Miss Duran's bosom.

"Gently, my darling, gently," says that lady, with a marvellous good temper, considering the damage the unexpected avalanche has made amongst her dainty ribbons "Is that the way to enter a room? Come now," striving

to look severe, as she marks the condemnatory glances of a stern-visaged woman near. "Say 'How d'ye do?' *nicely* to Lady Benson."

"How d'ye do nicely," says the naughty child, stepping forward with all the exquisite grace of childhood to offer a small hand to Lady Benson; but that austere person is not to be softened by any grace. She puts back the tiny hand with a settled determination.

"Do you know," she says, in a loud, unpleasant voice, "that you are a very ill-conditioned little girl. I greatly fear me"—with a pious sniff—"that you are the child of evil."

"I am not," says Clytie, indignantly; "I am the child of papa, and aunty is my mammy."

"Then auntie ought to be ashamed of herself," says Lady Benson, with an elephantine attempt at playfulness, and a forced smile directed at Miss Duran, who is in an agony at hearing her darling dispraised.

"Auntie is my dear duck, and I won't have you say one word against her," says Miss Clytie, stoutly. "Anyone that speaks bad of my auntie is bad herself!" After this declaration the child steps back a yard or so to look the better at her antagonist, and to deal the last blow safely. "So *now!*" she says, loudly, the note of challenge echoing through the room.

It echoes as far as the door, where Mr. Duran, having entered the room most unexpectedly, is now standing.

"Clytie on the war-path!" exclaims he, laughing. "Why, Clytie, how is this?" He is laughing, and now opens his arms to receive the little dainty figure that springs into them. "Wicked baby," says he, "what have you been doing?"

"Fighting with *her*," says the younger Miss Duran, who has a pretty sharp brain of her own. She points to the upright Lady Benson, who is glowering upon her with a malignant eye. What she would have given to have had the child alone with her for a quarter of an hour would amount to a goodly sum.

"My dear Clytie," says Mr. Duran, a little shocked.

"Well, she was scolding my auntie," says Clytie, beginning to whimper a little. "And she said I wasn't your child—she said I was the baby of someone else; and that was a bad lie, and——"

"Oh hush, my pet!"

By this time Clytie is dissolved in tears.

"I'll go to my other mammy; I won't stay here," cries she, clambering down out of her father's arms.

"I wish to goodness your other mammy would come here and take charge of you, whoever she may be," says Mr. Duran, half laughing, thinking she is alluding to her nurse or one of the other servants.

"I'll tell her," says the child, still weeping; and, struggling out of the arms that would still have held her, she scampers out of the room.

Mr. Duran, thus freed from his tyrant, looks round him. To see anything here so young and lovely as Millicent Grey is both as strange as it is pleasant to him, and he is just telling her so, when a voice at his side checks him.

"Now, papa, here she is," cries Clytie, triumphantly.

"Who?" demands he, turning quickly.

"My other mammy," answers the irrepressible Clytie, as she pushes forward Nadine Roche.

"You sent for me, Mr. Duran?" murmurs Nadine, gently.

"I—sent—?"

He is so taken aback, so overcome at seeing her stand thus suddenly close by his side, as though she had uprisen from the earth, that speech fails him.

"Clytie told me you wanted to see me. I was putting away her books. She *assured* me you desired me to come to you," stammers the girl, in an agony of confusion.

"She only spoke the truth then," says Duran, conquering his own surprise as he sees how cruelly his hesitation has unnerved her.

"I told you so," cries Clytie, gayly. "I said I would go to my other mammy, and he said, 'Bring her here'—and here she is," pointing out Nadine with little loving hands to her father.

Poor Nadine! Her eyes fill with tears, and a pallor that might belong to the dead overshadows her face. Why will not the earth open and blot her out of remembrance? She shrinks back as if stung, careless of the fond childish touch that would have detained her. "Her mammy?" *Hers!* Alas! if all things had been otherwise—if her word had not been so miserably plighted—her "other mammy" indeed she might have been. But as it is!

She is still standing with downcast eyes, uncertain whether to go or stay, and longing passionately for some chance that may help her out of her present dilemma; when a voice, well known and well-beloved, breaks on her ear.

"Nadine! *such* luck!" cries Millicent, rustling toward her. "When I came here to-day, I never dreamed I should see you. Now I am going; so jump into the brougham, and come home with me to give me those valuable German lessons that will never make a German of me. What a poverty-stricken smile; it quite freezes me! Come, haste thee, my pretty innocent! I am bound to be home before auntie, or there will be somebody to pay."

She hurries Nadine with her across the room, Massareene in attendance; bids a gentle farewell to the little old maid who has wrought more mischief to-day than she is at all aware of, and finally pushes Nadine into the brougham. There is a farewell smile to Gerald, a lingering pressure of the hand, a soft rose-leaf blush that sets his heart a-throbbing, and then the carriage rolls toward Park Lane, and Miss Duran's afternoon, so far as they are concerned, is at an end.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONLY as they are driving homeward has Nadine time to tell her friend that, after all, this is *not* one of her days for imparting a knowledge of the German language to that young lady.

"So much the better," says Miss Grey, promptly. "It will give us all the more time to take our tea and relieve our minds. My mind wants considerable relief. But not a word more—not a *word*, until I am in the sanctity of my own room."

She bustles Nadine out of the carriage just as she had bustled her in, and hurries her across the hall and up to her own special sanctum with a vivacity that fairly takes her breath away.

"Now we are snug!—now we are beyond observation!—by which I mean the base criticism of our equals," says Millicent gayly, pushing her friend down into a soft lounging-chair, and preparing to throw aside her own bonnet. "As to the servants' hall, it is only the mild fool who believes himself safe from *its* voice. I'm not a mild fool, though a fool *pur et simple* might so pen me."

Her tone sinks and takes a touch of solemnity, as she stands well back from Nadine, a brush in one hand, a powder-puff in the other, and says slowly:

"My end has come!"

Nadine springs to her feet. She is a little overstrung as it is, and this last momentous declaration unnerves her altogether.

"Millicent, what is it? You must be mad to speak like that!" she cries nervously.

"I must be mad to act as I did, certainly," returns Miss Grey, subsiding into comedy and a chair. She breaks into a light laughter. "Did I really frighten you?" cries she. "Well, I'm rather terrified myself, so you must forgive me. To speak to somebody is a necessity, and who should I confess to, if not to you, Nadine?" leaning toward her.

She has put down the brush and the puff by this time.

"To confess? What have you done, then?" demands Nadine, trembling.

"A most tremendous thing, my good girl. I have actually defied the family. Uncle Timothy has been slighted by me; my aunt scorned."

"I wish you would say what it is you mean," interrupts Nadine, impatiently.

"The explanation will go into a nutshell. I have simply broken off my engagement with Granit."

"With your cousin? Oh, Millicent, what will Mrs. Brand say? And when did you do it? When did you see him? What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"What! He bore it in silence? He uttered no word of reproach?"

"Nary reproach," says Miss Grey, with a most unseemly levity. "'Cos why, my dearest child, he wasn't there to utter it."

"But I thought you said that—that you——"

"Had broken off all communicating wires with Captain Boyle. That is so. But not immediately—not face to face. Do you believe in spiritualism?"

"No—of course not."

"Well, I do—specially in mediums. I employed a medium in my little *séance*—or, rather, he employed himself. Guess who it was."

"Mr. Massareene," responds Nadine, promptly, upon whom the truth has dawned.

"Good child! Go up one. Gerald Massareene it was. Oh! Nadine"—she has changed her tone once more, and her attitude too, and is now kneeling at Nadine's feet, with her arms round her waist—"I have found it out at last."

"What have you found?"

"That I do so *love* Gerald! You can't imagine how nice he can be—on occasions."

"There was an occasion, then, to-day?"

"Yes—and *such* a one! I am sure I shall adore Gerald's great-grandfather until the day I die."

"Favored old man! I hope he is sensible of the havoc he has created in your breast."

"I hardly think so. All that is left of him is a portrait."

She laughs a little, and then tells her story of Miss Duran's afternoon to her friend.

"I am sure Miss Duran knew nothing," she says, when her story has come to an end. "I am sure she guessed a good deal. And, at all events, to-day has decided me. I shall never wed Granit, though I am not certain that I shall wed Gerald."

"You mean—that you doubt——"

"My love for him—no. But circumstances may prove too strong. They will not be strong enough, however, to take me to the altar with my best-beloved cousin."

"I am afraid Mrs. Brand will be terribly disappointed."

"And terribly angry. You may as well add that. I shall not tell her yet, however. I shall wait, let things go on, and finally decide on the best way of breaking the fatal tidings. It is a pity Granit is so fascinating to ladies of middle age. To me he is almost repulsive. Still, he is handsome."

She pauses meditatively.

"I wish I had seen him. I could then so much better understand," says Nadine.

"Yes; it seems absurd that you and he should still be unknown to each other—and yet why should it not be so? He is not always off duty—and—neither are you. Your free days clash. Some day, however, I shall bring you together, if only to let you see the beauty of the tyrant they had marked out as a companion for me. Was that the door opening? Was that auntie's step? Good, my child! step lightly to the staircase top, peer over, and ascertain the deadly fact—if fact it be. Let us at all hazards be prepared for the worst."

"The worst?"

"Why, naturally. Auntie was on the verge of unparliamentary language when I declined to go to the concert with her to-day. She will now be anxious to investigate matters, and an explanation will mean an unholy row.

Run to the staircase—run, my sister Anne, and tell me if anyone is coming."

Nadine obeys her, and presently returns.

"It was your aunt—yes," she says; "but she is not coming here. She has gone into the drawing-room."

"A respite. I breathe again!"

Miss Grey is about as far from fear of any kind as she says this as anyone can imagine.

"She is not alone. There is another lady with her," says Nadine. "A tall woman—stout, fair, handsome—with——"

"A nose! You graphically describe her. That is my other aunt—my dear Granit's mother. She has indeed a nose. Not that she is like Granit. She is a dear old soul, and much to be pitied, in that he belongs to her, though I suppose she regards the matter in another light. I want you to come down and see her. Auntie has been talking to her about you; and, besides, I dare say Granit will drop in before dinner, and then I shall be able to let you judge of him. Come!"

She moves toward the door, and Nadine follows her.

CHAPTER XVII.

Lady Valworth sighs profoundly as she drops into a chair, and receives with a thankful smile her late but ever welcome cup of tea.

"Such a crush! Such an abnormal temperature! Talk of India!"

She sighs mildly, as all fat women sigh. The concert had indeed been overcrowded, as the diva was to sing.

"I hate the ultra-fashionable concerts!" says her sister-in-law, Mrs. Brand, who is feeling slightly fractious. "The others are nearly, if not quite, as good, and there is the advantage of finding one's self alive after them; but this afternoon! To look at the Duchess of Downshire was to guess the rest. Poor woman! she grew so flushed, so heavy, toward the end, that I wonder the chair didn't give way under her."

"Where is Millicent?" asks Lady Valworth, rather inconsequently.

"In her boudoir with Miss Roche." Mrs. Brand's tone

is slightly sharp. "I asked Brown as I came in, and he told me so."

"How did she spend her day?"

"With some people rather out of my set, though in a specially good one—if a rather dull one—of their own. You remember the Durans—old Fanny Duran more particularly? She is keeping house for her nephew now."

"Maurice Duran, who lost his wife some years ago? A silly little woman with a temper, as I remember her. A daughter of Lord Ashborough's."

"Yes. The wife was insupportable to a degree. Well—he lives with his aunt now. And what on earth Millicent could see in Fanny Duran to make her miss to-day's concert is more than I can conceive; sometimes that girl worries me beyond belief."

"Well, I think it was very nice of her," returns Lady Valworth, pleasantly. "Few girls nowadays would give even a thought to an old woman like Fanny. Yes, it was kind of her."

She taps her spoon softly against the edge of her cup, and tells herself that this niece of hers—so soon to be her daughter-in-law—is indeed a treasure to be desired.

The approval in her tones softens Mrs. Brand's resentment in a degree. After all, perhaps she had been a little hard on Millicent. She must have spent a terribly dull afternoon just to pay a compliment to an old woman, and had evidently come straight home from the Durans' with Nadine, who is propriety itself, and safety, and everything that is desirable for the madcap Millicent. Her heart quite warms to Nadine (who in reality is a great favorite of hers) at this moment.

"I dare say you are right," she says. "And as to Nadine Roche, that little friend of hers, I have wanted to say a word to you about her for some time. She is such a sweet girl—so gentle, so thoroughly bred—but poor, you know. Her father, General Roche, died suddenly, and there was no provision for the family—a very usual thing with military men—and so the poor child has to give lessons to eke out the slender income that she and her mother possess."

"A sad story—but hardly an uncommon one. You suggested that I could help her—that you wished to enlist my sympathies with regard to her, but as yet I hardly see how I can be of use. If money——"

"Oh! no. Nothing at all of that sort. But of late it

has seemed to me that she is looking pale; and, now that the season is drawing to a close, and Millicent and I are to go to you to the Park, I think it would be very good of you if you would ask the poor child there too, if only to give her a breath of fresh air. She is looking really ill, it strikes me, and, if you *could* put her up for a bit, I know it would delight Millicent."

"Why, of course—of course," says kindly Lady Valworth. "Anything to please dear Millicent; and, besides, all you have said about Miss Roche quite interests me."

"She is well worth your interest," begins Mrs. Brand warmly, when footsteps on the landing outside check her. "Ah! here she comes, probably. Now you will be able to see for yourself what a remarkably charming creature she is."

The door, opening, admits the two girls—Millicent smiling, and a little mischievous perhaps, as a sort of armor against the scolding impending; Nadine calm and gentle, as usual. Lady Valworth, as she takes her hand, holds it kindly, and gazes long into the girl's lovely face. Her blue eyes, innocent as a summer sky, her soft waving hair, the charm of her mobile mouth, all make a deep impression upon the mother of Granit Boyle.

"Mrs. Brand tells me you are looking pale, my dear," she begins, drawing the girl down upon the seat near her; "that London smoke has robbed you of all your pretty roses. I cannot speak from my own experience, of course, as this is the first time we have met, but it seems to me that a pretty child like you should not have such sorrowful eyes."

Nadine laughs a little, but the tears rise as she does so to the "sorrowful eyes."

"Are you strong—are you well?" goes on Lady Valworth, still keeping possession of the girl's hand.

"I think so. You are very good. To trouble yourself at all about me is very kind. And indeed there is nothing the matter with me—except—except that sometimes I feel a little tired."

"Tired. Ah! yes, I see. Well, there is a little scheme afloat about you. A tiny conspiracy, let me tell you. Have you ever heard of Valworth Park? Yes? It is a very pretty place, I will allow, and one calculated to bring back the blushes to pale cheeks," touching Nadine's face as she speaks. "Well! What do you think of our scheme? Will you like to come to me to the Park for a week or two?"

"To go to the country—to see again the green fields—the trees—the flowers," breathes Nadine, faintly.

"And more than that," laughs Lady Valworth, gayly. "You shall not be left to the lambs for company. Millicent is coming to me too, and a good many others. Some friends of yours. Mr. Duran and his little Clytie, for example."

Where are the pale lips now, the languid lids? Gone. Uplifted are the lids, and from beneath them two great, eager, sparkling eyes gleam forth.

"It is true, my dear," chatters on her ladyship, pleased with the effect her announcement is having on the pretty child beside her, though she entirely misunderstands the pretty child's agitation. "I always have my house full in August, for many reasons. For one, the grouse; for another, because Captain Boyle's birthday (my son, my dear) occurs in August, and I always give my big dance then." She smiles charmingly and pats Nadine's hand as though the mention of her handsome son is sweet to her. "So you see you will not be compelled to a prosy *tête-à-tête* with an old woman. You shall have youth to make you merry and take that tired look out of your pretty eyes. Though I regret my son will not be with us until the seventeenth, the evening of his birthday fête—just barely in time for it, in fact."

"He is going away?" murmurs Nadine, by way of making conversation, though, in truth, she hears little, and can think of nothing but that Maurice Duran is to be at the Park at the time for which she has been invited. Can she accept the invitation? *Dare* she? But, oh! how good a thing it would be to be near him for a whole week—perhaps a fortnight!

"Yes," Lady Valworth was saying, apropos her son, "he is going abroad to Switzerland, he tells me, with some bachelor friends of his. Of course he has many friends. When you meet him," with a proud smile, "you will understand *that*. And so you will come, my dear? Millicent, I hear, will be inconsolable if you refuse."

"I—I should like it"—begins Nadine, stammering and faltering, afraid to refuse, afraid (*far more* afraid) to accept, that little struggle with her conscience not being yet ended.

"Then that's all right," declares Lady Valworth, heartily, mistaking her indecision for shyness. "Millicent, darling," calling to Miss Grey, who has just come off victorious in an encounter with her auntie, who has, at the close

of it, found herself declaring, very much against her better judgment, that Gerald Massareene, for a pauper, is a wonderfully well-regulated young man, and that, of course, there was no harm in Miss Grey's meeting him at Miss Duran's afternoons.

"So long as you remember you are engaged to your cousin," she winds up, desperately. Miss Grey shrugs her shoulders and nods acquiescence. The time is not yet ripe, she tells herself, for springing the entire truth "upon her already too distressed aunt." As she finishes this remarkable sentence in her own mind she laughs, and assures herself that the lessons in German have not been entirely wasted!

"Millicent, darling," calls Lady Valworth, and Millicent, starting slightly, turns to her, "your little friend here has promised to come to me on the fifth. That is the day on which you have decided, is it not?" looking at Mrs. Brand. "Of course, my dear," to Nadine, "it will be nicer and more comfortable for you to travel with Mrs. Brand."

"Of course," says Mrs. Brand, and so the discussion ends. Nadine's conscience, whether satisfied or not, is forbidden further interference. All management in the affair has been taken out of her hands.

She is feeling depressed and rather nervous. Rising, as Millicent comes toward her, she bids a soft but hasty adieu to Lady Valworth.

"So soon, Nadine?" says Mrs. Brand. "Why, Lady Valworth has not had time to grow accustomed even to your face yet. Could you not stay and dine? You so seldom come to us on an off-day, one that is separate from your German, that I should like to keep you to-night."

"Yes, do stay, Nadine," entreats Millicent.

"You need not mind your gown," says Mrs. Brand. "There will be nobody but Captain Boyle."

"Thank you. Not to-night. Mamma would be uneasy if she did not know what had kept me," returns Nadine, gently. She would another time have been delighted to stay, but now she longs only for the moment when she shall find herself alone, that she may think without interruption of this strange joy—this happiness, half fear—that has been offered to her.

The entrance of other visitors checks further solicitations from Mrs. Brand and Millicent, and, pressing the latter's hand gently, she slips past her, and runs down the staircase into the hall.

The sound of someone whistling as she reaches it attracts her attention. Looking round, she sees a young man, with his back turned to her, bending over a letter under the centre lamp. Her footstep, light always, had been unheard upon the carpet of the stairs, but now, as it reaches the marble beneath, a faint click makes itself known. The young man, turning sharply, looks at her. He is standing exactly beneath the lamp, so that his face is distinctly visible. It is Paul Annerley!

CHAPTER XVIII.

If the idea that he looked startled and turned pale on seeing her at first suggested itself to Nadine, it is speedily routed. Mr. Annerley, coming up to her, holds out his hand with quite a beaming smile.

"You! It is not one of your days, surely," he says.

His tone is crisp, abrupt; in another man it might be called flurried. A long, light overcoat covers him from his neck to his boots. Even though she cannot see the clothes beneath, some sudden fancy strikes Nadine that he is slightly *en fête*. This idea, too, however, is put to flight before it has time to harden on her brain.

"No. It is not one of my days, but——"

She is so astonished at seeing him here in Mrs. Brand's house, that she finds a difficulty in speaking quickly or freely.

"You are going," interrupts he, shortly; "so am I. Come."

He opens the hall-door as he speaks, and motions to her to precede him. It is all done in a moment. If he had meant to get her out of the house with a speed that admitted of no delay, he could not have done it more promptly. Still devoured with surprise at his presence in Park Lane, Nadine forgets to comment upon this, even in her thoughts, until long afterward.

As they leave Mrs. Brand's house behind them Annerley's manner undergoes a change. It loses its briskness, and returns to its usual calm habit.

"But you—perhaps you did not want to come away so soon," says Nadine, in a low, bewildered tone.

What could a City clerk want in Mrs. Brand's house at that hour?

"Yes; I was quite ready. My business was finished," returns he, steadily.

"Your business? Business with Mrs. Brand?"

"And very serious business! So serious that it is conducted as secretly as possible."

"It has to do with your—your—firm?" asks she, in an awed tone.

"With—my firm? Yes. I was sorry you met me here. It is of the utmost consequence that my comings and goings at that house should be kept dark."

He glances at her keenly as he speaks.

"You need not be afraid," says Nadine, quietly. "I shall say nothing of it. I shall not mention having met you. You may be at rest about that. But I confess I am amazed—astonished!"

"Come in here. It is a fine evening. A walk will do you good, and—I have something to say to you."

Entering the principal entrance to the park, they stroll together in silence—pass the Row, the drive, the last touch of humanity in the shape of Lifeguardsmen and nursery-maids, until they find themselves in a dull out-of-the-way spot, and, virtually speaking, alone.

"Yes; I am more surprised than I can tell you," says Nadine again, pausing to look into his face. "To meet you *there!* And this secret business—I hope it means no harm to Millicent—Miss Grey?"

"None at all, I assure you." He laughs easily. "I shall not harm Miss Grey. My business, so far as she is concerned, will very soon be at an end."

"Then she is mixed up with it."

"Well, yes."

"Paul," says Nadine, leaning forward and speaking in a low tone, "I think I have guessed it. It—it has something to do with—her sapphires."

An extraordinary gleam flashes across Mr. Annerley's features. It is momentary, but brilliant. Fear, suspicion, and something stronger still are all blended in it. It may be that he is disconcerted at having his "business" with Mrs. Brand thus publicly put into words. To be discovered, no matter how innocent the offence, is disagreeable to most.

"You are not pleased that I have found it out," suggests Nadine, timidly. "But do not let it distress you. I shall bury the knowledge in my heart. No one shall be the wiser for it."

"You will do well to do so," says Annerley, recovering himself with an effort. "You will take care also not to let it be known by word or glance that you met me to-night at Mrs. Brand's. Much depends upon your faithfulness in this matter."

"Then you have found a clew to the thief? You are on his track?" asks she, breathlessly.

"Yes; there is a clew." He pauses a moment, looking down into her eyes as though he would read her very soul. "*Swear* to me you will not mention having met me to-night," he says at last, in a low, vehement tone.

His intensity frightens her.

"There is no need for it. I have promised; but if you wish it, yes—I swear not to reveal our having met," she answers, nervously. "Was it this you wished to say to me, Paul?"

"This—and something else. But first——"

He breaks off abruptly, and, laying his hands upon her shoulders, turns her so he can see her better. He has been gazing at her intently, and the extreme beauty of her flower-like face, enhanced by the touch of timidity his stern voice and manner have brought into it, has set on fire the love that already burns brightly in his bosom. She is the one solitary thing on earth that he cares for—the one human creature he adores with a passion, wild, ungovernable, that sometimes from the very strength of it makes even him tremble. If he should *lose* her! The very idea makes the blood rush tumultuously to his head. And there is that to be said to her to-night that—But she will not fail him—she *shall* not!

"Nadine!" exclaims he, in a suppressed tone, low, vehement. "Tell me that you love me."

The girl starts, shrinks. She lifts a face to his from which every drop of blood has receded, but no answer comes from her white lips.

"You are silent," declares he. He pauses again, and an agonized expression darkens his eyes. "What! have you nothing to say? Always I have known that my love for you was stronger than anything you could ever feel for me, but I have lived in a heaven that told me I was at least dearer to you than any other. Was it a fool's paradise?"

Again this terrible silence. She tries helplessly to break the cruel numbness that is binding her in thrall, and killing the power of speech within her. Her mute, miserable eyes are fixed on his, but no words pass her lips.

"I will not believe it," he goes on, speaking rapidly now, as though by his own masterful manner he would persuade himself that the fear within him is of no account. "I have loved you so well that I will not believe you have given me no return. All my heart—nay, my very soul is yours to save or ruin, as you will. Is such devotion to go unrewarded? See! I am waiting—trembling before you as the veriest leaf that grows, lest your word fail me. Does not this touch you? Are you insensible, heartless? Well, then! if you cannot from your heart say that you love me, at least tell me that your heart is empty—that you are indifferent to all the world."

He waits breathlessly. But as the waiting lengthens, a dark frown gathers on his brow, and a savage expression curves his lips. Nadine, faint, terrified, and still with that terrible numbness overpowering her, draws back a step or two and presses her hands convulsively against her face. Annerley, laying his hands upon her shoulders, gives her a violent shake. A low cry escapes her. This cry releases her from the nervous bondage in which she has been held.

"Speak, girl!" cries he, roughly. "It is true you never yet told *me* that you love me. Am I now to learn that you have made that confession to another man?"

"Oh! no! no!" The assurance falls from her with a fervor which he places to a wrong account. With a passionate thankfulness she tells herself that she can at least answer this last question with truth. To no man has she said, "I love you."

"Ah!" says Annerley, drawing a long breath of eager relief, "that is well *for my rival* had he existed."

There is such subdued ferocity in his tone that Nadine shivers.

"Be content," she says, calmly, "you have no rival. There is no one I can marry——"

"Except me. That is as it should be." He sighs heavily, and still regards her with a lowering brow. "Now for my news," he says.

"To-morrow. Will not to-morrow do?" asks she, faintly, feeling tired and overdone.

"To-morrow I shall probably be out of town. Yes," answering her glance of surprise, "I shall be abroad for a week or two—on business."

"The same business?" demands she, eagerly.

"You are a wonderful guesser," returns he. There is a

vague suggestion of a sneer in his smile. "Before going, however, I want to tell you that a stroke of luck has at last fallen at my feet. To-day the—my—my chief sent for me and offered me a—a higher stool in the office, in fact——"

He has hesitated a good deal, and seems indeed singularly ignorant of the proper terms to be used with regard to his rise in his position.

"I am very glad," says Nadine, in her clear, cold, girlish voice, so devoid of real interest.

"This rise will enable me to marry," continues he, watching her closely. She is evidently aware of his scrutiny, because her face remains impassive, even while her fingers interlace each other and grow into a clasp that leaves her knuckles white. She nods her head softly in answer to his remark, not trusting herself to speak.

"But it will take me out of town." He is watching her still narrowly. But this time she manages to meet his gaze. If, indeed, her fate is to marry this man, and go with him wheresoever he goes, then it will only be kind of fortune to drive them into the country, far from this great London, where one meets everyone, and where those known to her in her present life might sometimes (cruel thought) be seen by her.

"Well?" she says.

"It will take me out of the country. The fact is," continues he, rushing at the rest of his communication, "I have been offered a post of—of trust that will take me to America."

"You go there in search of this man who has stolen the sapphires?" says she, quickly. "You are hunting him down. Is this your post of trust? Are you a—a detective?"

Something like a vague smile flits across his face as he notices how she shrinks from him.

"Not exactly." His tone is full of mystery. "If detectives are abhorrent to you, be happy in the thought that I have nothing in common with them; that, in fact, I detest them quite as much as you do. No; I am going there in advance of the detectives, as I hope. You'll be ready to come with me?"

"Is it to be soon?"

"It may sound soon to you, perhaps. In about a month from to-day." It is now growing toward the end of July. "But I may have to start earlier than that. You will be ready?"

He is very pale as he presses the question. If she refuses—if she even bargains for more time, it will cause confusion. But she does not refuse. A profound sigh escapes her, but she says:

"Yes, I shall be ready," in a voice subdued but void of trembling. If she is to marry him, and thus to resign all good the world can give her, it will make little difference whether she lives with him here, or in that far country he has named; then a sudden thought occurring, she looks at him eagerly: "My mother?" she says.

"Will of course accompany us."

"Will your stay there be long?"

"I hardly know—for some years certainly; after that it is undecided."

"Everything is undecided that lies in the years beyond;" she sighs again. "You are going abroad to-morrow, you say?"

"Yes, for a week or two—perhaps three. But I shall be back in time for our wedding."

He attempts to speak lightly, but the sad look on the girl's face checks him. He is, however, too elated by the victory already achieved to know any fear for the future. No doubt she is pining at the thought of leaving her home, but once married to him, the power and persistence of his love will conquer all regrets. So he thinks; so he vainly believes.

"Don't look so grieved, my darling," he whispers fondly, pressing her hand between both his own. "Think of the long and happy future that lies before you, with me forever as your slave. The time will come, Nadine, when you will not regard any ties but the one that binds me to you. Ties of home and kindred will be as naught beside it. Though now, perhaps, you give me your heart unwillingly, *then* you will love even as you are beloved. Oh, that that glad hour were blended with this!" He presses his lips ecstatically to the hand he still holds. His whole face grows bright with the affection that glows within him. Then one word that he has used returns to him with unpleasant force. "Unwilling," he goes on musingly, frowning slightly. "Yes, you are unwilling to give me your heart."

"Ah, no!" says she, gently, and with a troubled air of uncertainty; "I am not unwilling. You mistake me. I would, with all my soul, that I could love you as you desire, and perhaps, indeed, in time—" she hesitates, as

though lost in a labyrinth of painful thought. "No, I am not unwilling," she repeats again, feeling how good a thing it would be for her could she indeed obliterate from her mind all the too dear past, and give herself entirely to this man. "You speak as though I am obstinately withholding something—as if you believed you were *robbing* me of the heart on which you set such store. But it is not so. Whatever else you may have stolen, it was not my love. You cannot steal that; but some day, perhaps, I shall give it to you."

Preoccupied as she is with sad and hurtful memory, she is roused to present life by the curious glance and start that follow on her speech. Both are subdued as suddenly as they came, and Annerley once more regards her with only the ardent look of affection that before was his; but Nadine cannot forget that they were there. Has he heard of Mr. Duran? Has Nadine's acquaintance with him come to his ears? Does he suspect Duran of being the thief who has stolen from him his love's heart? She feels a little cold and sick with anxiety as she waits for his next words. They reassure her.

"You give me fresh life," he says. "Some day, indeed, the love I crave shall be mine. And now," glancing at his watch, "I fear our last moment has come. Now I must bid you farewell, until the happy time that will see me home to you, with our near marriage only a few hours distant. Good-by, my darling, my best beloved!"

Not a living soul is in sight. Folding her closely in his arms, he holds her to him as though he could never again suffer her to go. She feels the reality, the wild earnestness of his love at this instant as she never before realized it. Softened, subdued by it, she gently returns his embrace, and then stands back from him.

"You will think of me—kindly, lovingly," breathes he, with passionate entreaty. "Sweetheart! if you could only know how hard it is to part from you for even these few days! Nadine, have pity on me, and *try* to love me in my absence. They say 'absence makes the heart grow fonder;' prove the saying true. Alas! how fatally honest your sweet eyes can be. There is nothing in them for me—nothing but pity! Well, even that is better than a few other things I could name—it is at least akin to love. But have you no sorrow in that we must part? Are you cold *always?* Suppose we should never meet again after this hour—never in all our years on earth? would not this

move you? Why, no! You look bewildered, but not sad It is the last moment! I cannot see you again to-night—because—because of— Never mind that. Good-by, my *pretty* girl!"

Once again he folds her in his arms! Once again he passionately presses his lips to hers!

He releases her.

"This fear of mine is folly," he whispers, heavily. "It is but for a week or two. We shall meet again, to know no other parting—save death!"

He guides her quickly on her backward way to where again the gates loom large and dark. Into a cab outside he puts her, lays his face for an instant against her palm, and then is lost among the growing mists of the night.

Now, and only now, Nadine remembers how she had forgotten to tell him of the projected visit to Valworth Park!

CHAPTER XIX.

A SWEEPING lawn; broad terraces; far away as the eye can see a gleaming, swaying ocean. Behind the lawn a background of giant firs that blot out the sky in that direction, and throw into brilliant relief the white-clad figures darting to and fro upon the tennis-ground.

Gerald Massareene, having lost his game, flings his racket to the winds, and throws himself prone at the feet of Nadine Roche.

"Pretty place, eh?" says he. "Soothing to the nerves after the town fever?" Then, looking at her and marking the extreme repose of her bearing, that almost borders upon lassitude, he says, gently, "Tired?"

"No."

She brightens up with an effort, and smiles at him in her kindest fashion. Her thoughts are tangled—her mind perturbed. Both are far from the busy scene before her. A sense of despair, of inability to move in the path that stretched out so temptingly to her view, has saddened her eyes and given a mournful curve to her beautiful mouth.

Her days passed here with Maurice Duran have been infinitely sweeter to her than ever she had dreamed they might be. The very nearness of their companionship had had its charm, and though no word of love had come from his lips, still, eyes can speak when words are forbidden;

and though honor renders one dumb, who can prevent the sense of gladness that comes with the touch of one beloved?

Sweet days! too sweet to last—and swift as sweet. A whole fortnight has gone by—two weeks crowded with such exquisite recollections as will (unhappily) cling to her for all her life. And now it is the 16th—to-morrow will be the night of the grand ball, given in honor of Captain Boyle's birthday, who is expected to arrive about an hour before it opens, and then— Another cruelly blissful week, perhaps, and after that a return to town, and—a hurried wedding! Then exile from all that has made life not only endurable but perfect.

Sometimes a thought of Paul Annerley has crossed her mind, but, as a rule, she has resolutely put all remembrance of him far from her. She had told herself that this one holiday at least should be her own. Afterward let oblivion, let misery come, but just for these few happy days she would let utter joy hold sway. She had heard nothing of her future husband since his departure, and if at times it had occurred to her as strange that he had not written to her from those foreign cities, whither his search of the robber of the famous sapphires led him, the sense of relief in not having to write to him swallowed up all such wonder.

"How should I feel tired?" she says now, smiling at Gerald Massareene, who has become quite a friend of hers.

He has found in her an ally—a certain partisan, who derides the notion of Millicent's ever consenting to fulfil her loveless engagement to Captain Boyle while her heart is given to another. That other, now stretched at the pretty partisan's feet, is quite willing to accept her reading of the situation. Though Millicent herself has been somewhat difficult to understand, a little vague in her answers, a trifle wilful, in a degree—a marked degree—averse to being brought to the point, still Mr. Massareene is inclined to believe in the creed of his pretty confidante when she declares herself ready to affirm publicly her belief in the constancy of his fair, if rather trying, love.

"Well, I'm glad you are not," says he pleasantly, alluding to her assertion that she knows no fatigue. "To-night there will be an influx of guests, ordered, like the supper, for to-morrow night, and it would not do to be in poor form. You look pale, however."

"Are many coming?"

"Enough to make us put on our best bib and tucker

and our choicest manners. You will have to make your very best bow to the lord-lieutenant of the county, and to smirk at a youthful if very famous general. The only thing to be careful about is not to overdo it to-night; to remember that the morrow will bring the big Nautch, and to reserve some smiles for the hero of the hour."

He speaks with some bitterness.

"To-morrow night will bring Captain Boyle." She looks at him softly out of her serene eyes. "Do not let that make you unhappy. His presence means less than nothing. Indeed, I believe it will do your cause good."

"Sweet prophetess! I would I dared share your creed."

"What creed?" asks Duran, who has joined them unseen.

"A belief Miss Roche has in the unconquerable power of love," replies Massareene gayly, springing to his feet and crossing the close turf to where he can see Millicent standing, for once, alone.

"And so you believe in love's omnipotency," says Duran, gazing at Nadine with calm, searching eyes. "*You.*"

"There is surprise in your tone—and doubt. Why should I not hold such a creed?" returns she, steadily, though her lips have grown very pale.

"I cannot answer that here. Will you come with me to the Fir-wood? I shall not keep you long, and I must speak to you. Do not refuse me, Nadine. This is probably the last hour we shall ever have together. I leave the Park the day after to-morrow."

She had shrunk a little from him when first he appealed to her, but as his pleading grew stronger, more impassioned, she rose. With her eyes downcast, and her color faded to a pallor that bespoke an anguished heart, she moved beside him to the wood he had mentioned.

Presently they enter it. The eternal greenness of it stirs her blood once more to an admiration that rouses her and compels her return to the immediate present. Ever since she had obeyed his word, and risen and followed him hither, she had been in a kind of waking dream that had been too sweet to permit her desire for its dissolution. Now, however, that she is fully awake to her danger as well as to her pain, it is too late to withdraw from a *tête-à-tête* that she feels must rive her soul.

Duran, stopping abruptly beneath the spreading branches of a huge Scotch fir, lays his hand upon her arm, thus arresting her footsteps also.

"If love be indeed all-powerful, how is it that I have failed?" he asks, in a low tone. "No love was ever stronger than that I bear for you, and yet it has been of no avail when matched against the barrier that stands between you and me. Has it been my fault, or is it that the love should be equal on both sides, and that—yours—falls below the mark?"

She had been standing with lowered lids and trembling hands, but now, as though forced to it against her will, she looks at him. Her large, dark, mournful eyes, are full of a reproach—mute, but so terrible that his heart grows warm within him. Alas! how clearly in those melancholy eyes is her pure love lying.

"It is true, then! I have your love," he says, always in a low voice, but none the less ecstatically; "and if so, my dearest, why will you repulse me? Ah! have pity on me, if you will not on yourself! Think—*think* before you sacrifice us both to a mistaken sense of duty."

"I have given my word," says Nadine—"my promise."

"A word—a promise—better broken. See here, my love, I have lived many years longer than you. *Too many*," he says, after a pause, that is filled with regret for those past hours when he had not known her, and when another had borne his name—another unloved and undesired. "I cannot bear to think what years lie between your birthday and mine; but still my very age gives me the right to speak. Is it good that you should surrender all your happiness to one for whom you have no real regard, just because you once gave him a hope to that effect? Nay, there is no loyalty in that. Better let him go than live to repent the bargain he has made."

"There is my word," persists she, meekly but earnestly. "I cannot take that back; and he, too, loves me. He loves me so well," declares she, with an intuition that has revealed to her the real passion of the man whom she has promised to marry, "that I think it would kill him did I now prove false."

"You are very tender toward him!" exclaims he, bitterly. "But of me? how is it with me? No, I shall not die; I am not made of such brittle stuff as this other lover of yours. I shall probably live even though you forsake me; but what of my life? is it to be all barren—all wasted? Have you no pity left for me?"

"Alas! is it kind to torture me?" says she, with such a

forlorn glance as once more reduces him to a forgetfulness of self, and to the old passionate regret for her.

"It *is* kind. If my cruelty can rescue you from the Slough of Despond into which you now are drifting it is more than kind. What! will you live out all your fresh young life without a joy—a hope? Nadine, I implore you to pause."

"It is too late." She lays her palms upon her bosom and regards him with blanched cheeks. "Oh! if I had only met you sooner; but now—now——"

"Your words are an acknowledgment of your love for me!" cries he, casting his arms about her. "I will surrender you to no man. Nadine! Beloved! Do not shrink from me—do not seek to unloose my arms."

"I must," sobs she, vehemently. "Have I not told you that all this comes too late? I—I am to be married in a fortnight."

It is his turn to shrink, to pale. He opens his arms instinctively, and lets her draw back from him with quivering lips, and trembling limbs that almost refuse to support her.

"I will not believe it," he says at last, hoarsely. "A fortnight! To give yourself body and soul to one for whom you care nothing—*in a fortnight!* Child! Darling! *Say* it is not true."

"I cannot!" She has buried her face in her hands. "My mother has arranged everything. All is with her consent. He has been abroad, but——"

"Where has he been?"

"I do not know, but——"

"Do you tell me you have not heard from him?"

"He is not to be blamed for that," says she, with the sweet justice that forms such a prominent part of her character. "He was sent abroad by his firm on a—a secret mission, and moving to and fro as he must do, it would not be possible that he should maintain a settled correspondence."

"You defend him well," says Duran, bitterly; "but to other women such a breach of the lover's code would hardly be forgiven. Others might suspect such devotion to business as savoring of a want of devotion to themselves; but you are different, apparently. He is fortunate in having fallen in with one so patient, so faithful."

"Nay," returns she sadly; "with one so *unhappily indifferent.*" She looks at Duran with a gaze as self-remorse-

ful as it is offended. "I am a traitor—a hypocrite," she says very low; "and it is all your fault."

"To be united with you, even in a fault, takes all the sting out of the remorse," declares he hardily. "And so—you are going to give yourself, of your own free will, to this—unloved lover in a fortnight?"

Nadine makes a little gesture of assent; to speak is hard to her.

"And that is a woman's honor—a woman's honesty," says he, pacing to and fro upon the mossy sward with a disturbed brow, and lips stern and compressed. "Do you think this man will thank you for the empty casket you are offering him! The body without the soul would be to me worthless. Who shall say he does not think as I do? Come"—stopping short before her and gazing at her fixedly—"tell me the name of this City clerk who stands between us! If you will do nothing toward the untying of a knot that may ruin three lives, I will."

"Paul Annerley."

"His address?"

Nadine hesitates; how can she tell him that she does not know it? And yet, what will he not think when he hears from her that her *fiancé's* place of abode is as yet a sealed letter to her.

"His present address?—she falters. "He is abroad, as I have told you; I cannot give it to you."

"Why not?"

"I do not know it."

"Not his foreign address, of course; but his home one. Give me that."

The blood rushes to her face; there is no longer any chance to evade his question. Now for the first time it dawns upon her as strange that she really knows so little of Paul Annerley that of his very address she is in ignorance.

"I don't know that either," she says in a slow constrained manner, her eyes downcast.

"You mean that you will not tell me," returns Duran coldly.

"Not that, indeed." Her voice is trembling, her face agitated. "Anything but that! Do you know me so little that you could accuse me of—of——"

She breaks down; that she cannot continue is evident to him.

"Forget what I said," puts in Duran hastily. "It was ungenerous, unpardonable—rude."

Indeed, he can hardly forgive himself as he looks at the pure, truthful face, so pale, so full of a hurt distress

"I know only this," says Nadine, making an effort to conquer her emotion; "it may—it *must* seem strange to you, but all I really know is, that he is a clerk in a large mercantile establishment—somewhere—in the City.

"Somewhere in the City—charmingly vague," says Mr. Duran with some satire in the meditation of his tone. "And is this all you have learned of the man with whom you have elected to spend your life?"

"My mother is satisfied—that is a great matter to me," says Nadine wearily.

"But I am not! And it is also a great matter to *me*," returns Duran, with a sudden vehemence. Then he moves so as to bring her face into a more prominent light. "Is it *possible* that you were content to remain thus ignorant of all private knowledge of this man?" he asks in a tone that is rendered calm with difficulty.

"I was content, because I did not *care*," returns she in a dull way, her eyes still upon the ground, her hands loosely clasped. Then, all at once as it were, she wakes into a quick passion of resentment. "Why do you compel me to say these things?" she cries, flashing at him two lovely angry eyes. "Am I not false enough to him in heart, that you must needs force me to put my treachery into words? Oh! it is cruel! How shall I face him again? How shall I—" Her voice fails her, and she covers her face with her hands. "How shall I *command* myself to fulfil my duty to him?"

"Is it your duty to him?" demands Duran in a moody tone.

She makes a little deprecating movement.

"Well, even if you do not know where he lives, your mother probably may; and at all events there are means of discovering most things," goes on her companion. "I shall find him, and lay the facts clearly before him."

"What facts?"

"That you do not love him," boldly. "That you do love me."

"And then——"

She is looking at him with a suddenly uplifted face, that is, if possible, a little paler than it was before.

"Why, then he will, I presume, if he has a spark of manhood in him, come straight to you, and ask you for the truth of my declaration; and you will give it to him."

"Alas!" says she, "you do not know him. He will give me up to no man." Annerley's face, as it was distorted with fierce jealousy that evening in the park when last she saw him, rises now before her, and fills her soul with dread. If he and this one love of her life were to meet—what *then?* She shudders violently. "Do not pursue this matter," she says, eagerly, going a step or two nearer to him and laying her hand upon his arm. "Do not, I implore you!"

"I shall pursue it until the iniquitous words are said that will bind you to him for life," replies he, doggedly. "Nay," grasping her hand as she turns hopelessly away from him, "do not think me unkind, my love; it is for your happiness as for my own I strive."

"If, indeed, you desire *my* happiness," cries she, risking all things in her longing to save him from a vengeance that some instinctive knowledge teaches her will be deadly, "abstain from intervention of any sort. Do not seek Paul Annerley. Let me fulfil my destiny. Let me marry him. Believe me, there is no hope!"

He might perhaps have misjudged her, and have believed her already wedded in heart to Annerley, but for her concluding words. But these, and the melancholy light in her large eyes, reassure him of the truth that in reality she is altogether *his*. There is, however, so keen a sense of weariness in her attitude and expression that he resolves on refraining from further argument.

"Well," he says, with an attempt at lightness that does not deceive her, "we have said enough for to-day, and you look tired. Come, let me take you home. Remember there will be a large addition to our party to-night, and of course you will like to look your best."

"I will go back to the house when you have promised me one thing," returns she, steadily: "that you will not seek Paul Annerley for four days from this. Give me these four days."

She is trembling with excitement, and her eyes are full of tears that will not be repressed. Four days. To-day—to-morrow; these two cannot be avoided. Were she to leave now, before to-night's dinner—that is but a herald of to-morrow night's ball, when Captain Boyle is expected, to grace his own birthday entertainment—it would be regarded as nothing less than an act of discourtesy by her kindly hostess. But the day after she might leave; Paul by that time will surely be returned to town—*and her* (bit-

ter thought!)—and she can easily so manage as to prevent a meeting between him and Mr. Duran.

"The four days you crave are yours," replies Duran, gravely, noting the fever in her eyes. "Now, in turn, concede me a gratification. Let me accompany you back to the Park."

CHAPTER XX.

MEANTIME Millicent and Gerald Massareene are standing in the warm sunshine in one corner of the tennis-ground. Miss Grey, who had been playing, but has now resigned her place and her racket to another, is looking at her companion with an expression half-wistful, half-mischievous—perhaps wholly mutinous.

"Time is flying," says the young man, ardently. "Have you not come to a decision yet? It is almost the last hour. After to-morrow there will be no grace left. *He* returns then."

"Granit? Yes."

"You must choose between me and him. You know that, and still you hesitate. When he returns it will give him an advantage, because then he will again have the world on his side—his very presence gives him an extra chance. If you could decide—if you could let me speak before he comes."

"I don't see how his presence or absence can influence the matter. There is to me only one thing to be considered—whether or not we can live happily when quite poor."

"It wouldn't be quite," interposes he, eagerly. "There would be the eight hundred a year."

"There would be—starvation!"

"If you choose to term it so," says he, a little haughtily, his Irish blood aflame. "And, *as* you so choose, it of course declares to me that you have made up your mind not to share it." He looks at her for a little while with his head well drawn up and his eyes full of an indignant entreaty. Miss Grey, receiving his look point-blank, knows that the moment has come to keep him or lose him for ever.

"You are so precipitate—so impulsive," she says, with a haste that is sufficiently well-bred to be devoid of the appearance of hurry that really belongs to it. "I understand

the case as well as you do," petulantly. "It is poverty with one man, misery with another. One has to decide between them—and—one does not like poverty!"

"Does one prefer misery?"

"N-o. I suppose not." Then she pauses and locks her fingers together, and then unlocks them. "It is misery either way," she says.

"Not if there is love," entreats he, softly. "And—you will have to make up your mind now."

"You mean that you will not wait to receive my decision later on?" asks she, with a sudden swift glance from her eyes.

"Yes, that is what I mean," says Massareene.

It *is* to be now or never, then! She realizes the situation at once, and admires her true lover a little the more in that she knows he will abide by his word, and that if she now trifles with him, he will be over the border to-morrow ere daylight shows the land, and beyond all recalling, be the voice of the charmer never so sweet.

"You mean, too——" she says, temporizing a little.

"Nothing but that. Make your choice now, to-day, between me and him. To-morrow there will be no choice left. If you do not love me, that will matter not at all, and I shall have had an escape from one who merely used me as a toy wherewith to pass the time. If you *do* love me, it will matter so far that you will break all bonds and defy all discomfort to link your lot with mine." His face is very pale as he says this, but his eyes are alight with resolution and his voice is firm. He is *almost* handsome as he looks at her, with his glance fond but determined, and his right hand resting on his heart inside his coat as though to still its tempestuous beating.

Miss Grey, with a tremulous smile, draws nearer to him.

"I have decided," she says, gently. "Now and forever."

"Is it to be him, or me?" Though his accent is steady, she can see that his very lips are bloodless.

"You, *you!*" she says. And then there is a long, long silence between them. They are standing in a corner of the tennis-ground open to all the world, so that any demonstration of joy or gratitude or love is impossible. But even when action is denied, the eyes can speak.

"My beloved!" says Mr. Massareene, in a tone so low that she can barely catch it, but it is so full of infinite delight and love that she tells herself it is sufficient in itself

to atone to her for the enormous fortune she is willingly flinging away for his dear sake.

"There is only one thing more," she says, after a little bit. "Do not speak of this until to-morrow has gone by. It will distress auntie and Lady Valworth, and spoil her party."

"But, if I say nothing, when Boyle returns he will still regard you as engaged to him, and—he may expect——"

"He will expect nothing. We have never been a loving couple, I assure you. No. Let the matter rest until Lady Valworth has had all her enjoyment out of her son's birthday ball."

"It shall be as you wish, of course." Then, forgetful of everything save of her, he takes one of her hands and holds it closely. "Millicent! tell me you have no regret—that you do not think I have done you harm instead of good."

"I think of nothing except that I have given myself to you for weal or woe, as the case may be, and that I believe it will be for weal."

"But if not, my darling? Now that I have really won you, I grow fainthearted lest you should ever repent. Oh! if you should do *that!* If there should be only poverty—that is woe—before you!"

"I should prefer that to weal with Granit or any other man," she says, softly, with such a light in her eyes as he had never seen there before.

. . . . . .

The day wanes slowly; and night draws near with reluctant footsteps. Nadine, standing before her glass is conscious of a thrill of satisfied vanity as she sees the dainty vision that is gazing back at her. All in white the vision stands: a simply clad thing in virgin muslin, but with a face above it beautiful as a dream. That it is her own face rejoices the heart of Nadine.

The many guests accumulating for to-morrow night's ball have all arrived, and it is with a flutter at her breast that Nadine takes a last glance at her charming person, and clasps round her neck the diamond cross—Paul Annerley's first gift to her. It had been deemed by her too grand an ornament to be worn on the earlier evenings here, when only a simple black grenadine had been her dinner dress; but to-night, as she sees herself looking all that the heart of man could desire, in her delicate Indian fabric, she

tells herself that the glistening diamonds are what will add the last finishing-touch to an already perfect picture.

Taking up her fan, and returning the maid's congratulations on her appearance with a pleased little laugh, she leaves her room and goes slowly down the staircase toward the drawing-room. For a minute or two she pauses outside the door, partly from natural nervousness at encountering so many strangers—their voices coming to her in a subdued murmur from within—and partly to give herself a last glance over in the huge mirror behind her, to assure herself that she is looking fairer than usual, and that in her true love's eyes she may find favor. She sighs a little as she remembers how far she will be from him in a few days' time—lost to him forever—bound irrevocably to one whom she may respect but can never love.

The smile has died from her lips, and her face is colorless as her gown when she has finished these sad musings, and, opening the drawing-room door, advances slowly to where she can see Lady Valworth in the distance.

The room is somewhat crowded. Many look up as she goes by them. Some regard her silently—these the men some ask, in a deprecatory way, who she is—these the women. All show an undisguised interest.

Lady Valworth, with whom she has become a reigning favorite, turns to greet her as she approaches her side.

"You must let me introduce you to a very charming little friend of mine," she says to her companion, Lord Aster, holding out her hand to Nadine with a kindly smile. "A friend, too, of Millicent's!" She gets through the introduction, and Lord Aster, an old beau with a juvenile lisp, and a wig, callow and golden as a chicken's down, murmurs something complimentary in a boyish tone that is as labored as it is ancient.

"There are a few arrangements as yet incomplete. Some eligibles unassigned," whispers Lady Valworth to her favorite. "I should like to give you someone who would amuse you through the tedious time of dinner. Would you like——"

She comes suddenly to a dead stop. She had been murmuring to the girl in a gay aside, with a smile upon her face, but now the smile has given place to a glance of mingled astonishment and horror. Her eyes are fixed on Nadine's breast, where the diamond cross—Paul Annerley's gift—is glittering and sparkling magnificently, as the girl's gentle bosom rises and falls.

"That—where did you get *that?*" demands Lady Valworth, in a stifled tone.

Lord Aster, fortunately, is glancing through his jaunty eyeglass at someone sitting quite at the other end of the room. Nadine and Lady Valworth are virtually alone.

"That?" asks Nadine, nervously, surprised by Lady Valworth's manner. She looks so innocently at her hostess that the latter, by a supreme effort, recovering herself, lays her hand reassuringly upon her arm.

"Nothing, my love. It was a mere start I received. That pretty cross upon your neck reminded me of one I used to admire long ago. Who gave it to you?"

"Paul Annerley—Paul, to whom I am engaged," says the girl, with a little sigh. In truth, the pretty bawble—the value of which is unguessed by her—is devoid of all tender interest, coming as it did from him.

"Ah! a pretty gift," returns Lady Valworth absently. In spite of herself her manner is constrained. She moves away from Nadine and crosses the room to where Millicent is standing, conversing with Gerald Massareene. Her face is very pale, and there is excitement in her eyes as she approaches her niece.

"Millicent," says she, abruptly, tapping Miss Grey's arm with her trembling fingers. "Something more than strange has happened. I must speak to you, because you are her friend, and——"

"What is it? You look as if you had seen a ghost!" exclaims Miss Grey, compelling her to sink upon a lounge near her.

"I have seen what I never hoped to see again! *Part of my stolen diamonds!* I have seen my diamond cross!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"WHERE?" exclaims Millicent, as much taken aback as even Lady Valworth can desire.

"Round Nadine's neck."

"Oh, you *must* have been mistaken! How could Nadine have a diamond cross of such value?"

"How, indeed! She said she had been given it by that man to whom she is engaged—Paul Annerley."

"A City clerk! Impossible! Dearest aunt, you may be sure you have made a mistake. These French jewelleries

are so good nowadays. They copy so exactly the fine old designs, that one is easily deceived when brought face to face with them."

"No; I am not deceived," says Lady Valworth. Her tone is that of one who is sure of her argument. It is, indeed, so strong, so unlike the usually vacillating Lady Valworth, that Millicent is struck by it. "It is my cross—the one belonging to the diamond set Sir Thomas gave me on my marriage, that is hanging round her neck."

"But how could Nadine——"

"If you doubt it," says Lady Valworth, with sudden vehemence, "let me have an authority to prove that what I say is right. Call Sir Thomas. He is over there. Ask him."

"Dear Lady Valworth, but you know you would not like to distress Miss Roche," puts in Gerald Massareene, who has been perforce a listener to the disclosure, and who now feels he must take a prominent part in the discussion.

He is amply rewarded for his interference by an eloquent look from Millicent.

"True—true!" says Lady Valworth, sighing. "I shall not speak to Sir Thomas now, but by and by I shall call his attention to it. Good heavens! Millicent, this may mean the recovery of the whole set."

"Hardly, I think. These matters drift. By piecemeal they enter the windows of respectable jewellers, and all the research in the world will not bring to light the real offenders."

"Still, it gives hope. I shall examine Nadine, and——"

"Not now—not until to-morrow night has gone over our heads!" entreats Millicent, eagerly, willing to spare Nadine a shock. "Why would you make unhappy a guest in your house, on the very eve of Granit's birthnight ball?"

This is the very argument of all others to gain over Lady Valworth to her way of thinking.

"Yes. All should go smoothly for Granit," says Granit's mother, thoughtfully. "And Nadine—she—she may not be to blame."

"*May* not?" Millicent's eyes grow dark with indignant reproach. "What can you mean by such a speech as that? Nadine! Do you for one instant believe that she has had any part in this strange story of which you speak?"

"My dear child, I would not hurt you in any way, as

you well know—not even through another. And as for Nadine, you can see yourself how highly I esteem her."

"Highly, indeed, when you can hint at scandal in connection with her."

"I have hinted at nothing. I confess I am horribly distressed at seeing my own cross round another's neck. Do you blame me for that?"

In her distress at having brought down the anger of her son's *fiancée* upon her head, and her agitation at seeing again a portion of her lost diamonds, poor Lady Valworth is reduced to the very verge of despair.

"Be reasonable, Millicent. At least, grant me justice. I have said nothing to Nadine. Why should I, when I deem her innocent? Yet the connecting link between me and the robber of my diamonds lies with her."

"I will not have her connected with this affair in any way," cries Millicent, hotly, tears in her eyes. "In seeking for your missing link, you will incriminate her, and terrify her, and make her wretched. And she has had nothing to do with it. Has she?"

She turns almost defiantly upon Massareene, who up to this has been silent. "Do *you* think she has?"

"A thousand times no!" declares he, gently. "Miss Roche and deceit of any kind seem to me as far apart as the poles. It stands to reason, too, that if she had known anything of the lost diamonds, she would hardly have worn them here."

He is so in earnest, so eager in his speech that Millicent, with her eyes full of tears, lays her hand on his. This act repays him for many things, and makes him trebly Nadine's friend. And his argument, too, goes home to Lady Valworth, so that two causes are gained. If the latter had ever permitted herself to have any doubts, they now vanish into nothingness, and only Nadine's pale, pure face rises before her. On such a face no guilt could lie!

"My dear, I meant nothing—nothing, so far as Nadine is concerned!" she cries in agitation; "but, of course, it is only natural that I should desire the return of my diamonds—Sir Thomas' diamonds. If Nadine can help me to a solution of this difficulty, I shall forever hold her in my debt."

"Who gave this cross to her?" asks Millicent suddenly, if a little coldly.

"The man to whom she is engaged. Paul Annerley, she called him. The man she is going to marry."

"You present him to me in the light of either a dupe or a swindler."

"A dupe, most probably. He may, however, be of use to us in the discovery of the missing stones."

"It will distress Nadine very much to have her lover accused of being even an outsider in this affair."

"I do not see that," says Massareene, quickly, who is as honest as he is fulfilled of love. "If he can lead justice to its ends, why should he not be used? Miss Roche, I am sure, would be the very last to prevent that; and so, when you come to think of it"—looking at Millicent—"would you."

"Well—perhaps. But Nadine must not be teased now. Not to-night. To-morrow night perhaps, when the ball is over—but not before."

"As you will," says Lady Valworth, with a sigh.

She would have liked to speak with Nadine now at once.

"Is it a conspiracy?" asks Duran, coming up at this moment, and touching Lady Valworth lightly on the arm. "You all look so solemn—even Miss Grey, who, as a rule, is gay as spring-time."

"Oh!" exclaims Millicent; "it is such a curious affair," she goes on; "auntie imagines she has seen to-night some of her lost diamonds. And where, do you think?"

"In the servants' hall?" suggests he, laughing.

"No. Here. In this very room, worn by one of her guests."

"Impossible!" Something in her tone removes the smile from Duran's lips. He turns to Lady Valworth. "A guest?" he says.

"Millicent is indiscreet," hesitates Lady Valworth, casting a reproachful glance at her niece.

"Not that; only a little angry," returns Millicent, with a rather tremulous smile. "And why should what you have told us be hidden? Why, after all, are we to whisper of it in corners? We almost condemn her in so doing."

"Condemn! Who?" exclaims Duran, sharply.

Instinct, love, what you will, has led him to a knowledge of the truth.

"Nadine," replies Lady Valworth in a low tone, her eyes lowered.

"Who has dared——" He checks himself abruptly, by an effort that renders his face as white and cold as marble. "You can scarcely allude to Miss Roche when speaking of

this matter," he goes on, with a labored attempt to appear calm.

"Of Nadine? Yes. But it is all a mistake," says Millicent. "Lady Valworth has seen a diamond cross around her neck. But one cross of that sort is so like another! I for my part feel sure it is a mere coincidence."

"It is a point on which no doubt should be allowed to rest even for a moment," declares Duran, his brow darkening. He looks round him. "Miss Roche is at the other end of the room. Will you permit me to bring her here, Lady Valworth, and let you have a closer examination of this cross? You, too, Miss Grey? You know the cross in question?"

"I have seen it—yes" says Millicent, slowly. "If you think it better to lift this doubt from Lady Valworth's mind *so*—bring Nadine here. But upon one thing I insist"—fixing her eyes first on him and then on her aunt with an imperious glance—"that no thought of our suspicion is betrayed to Nadine. I will not have her hurt—offended——"

She breaks off abruptly. She is agitated, and her eyes are troubled. Could she know it, her agitation—kindly, womanly as it is—has made Duran her friend for life.

"Certainly, no allusion should be made to—er—anything awkward," puts in Massareene hurriedly.

Duran has already gone in quest of Nadine; and presently returns, bringing her to where Lady Valworth, Millicent, and Gerald Massareene are standing.

The girl, flushed and lovely, forgetful for the moment of all her cruel future, and mindful only of the happy present that has given her Duran, advances toward the anxious, expectant group with smiling lips and wide, glad eyes. Upon her neck the fatal cross is rising, falling, glittering, as only the purest diamonds can. Millicent, her gaze fixed upon them, feels her heart contract. If not Lady Valworth's cross, it is unfortunately *horribly* like it.

Some few words pass between her and Nadine. The latter is too full of the hour's passionate joy to heed the grief within her friend's eyes. But Duran reads it. Lady Valworth, after one swift glance at the girl's neck, lets her gaze sink to her fan, with which she persistently trifles until Nadine has gone by them.

"Well?" she says then, addressing Millicent.

"I acknowledge it is like your cross—so like that it may

be yours; and, if so, no doubt this Paul Annerley bought it for her from wherever the thief sold it."

"A *City clerk!*—to buy that jewel!"

There is unbelief, keen and strong, in Lady Valworth's low tone.

"How else could he have obtained it? Who is this Paul Annerley? How should he have had access to your jewel-case?"

Miss Grey's tone is somewhat impatient.

"That is what I cannot say. I only know the cross is mine," replies her aunt doggedly.

"It resembles it. That I admit. But I think time will prove to you that you are mistaken. It is probably only paste."

"Paste of that sort is expensive for a City clerk."

Her obstinacy angers Millicent.

"Then in all probability, as I said before, it is mere glass—Spanish crystal—what you will," she says, shrugging her shoulders. "I can well believe it is a bit of French jewelry. What I cannot believe is, that Nadine has had any intercourse with a thief."

"As you have said, time will tell," replies Lady Valworth, moodily.

CHAPTER XXII.

TIME, in so far as it brings them to the next evening, has *not* told. The secret still lies within its ancient breast. It has not yet disburdened itself, nor declared aught that might heal the anxiety that rages in the flighty, but kindly, heart of Millicent Grey.

Twenty times during the day she had approached Nadine with a determination to fire off all sorts of point-blank batteries—meant to take the girl by storm—and twenty times she had been driven back, routed with great slaughter by the innocence of Nadine's lovely eyes. No; she could not ask a question that would make her friend unhappy, uneasy, distrustful of the man whom, if she did not love, she had at least elected to marry.

So the day wore on, and eventide came and died, and now night is on them, and once again Nadine is standing before her glass—a mirror that reaches from ceiling to floor—regarding with anxious gaze the lovely form that gazes back at her.

Once more she would be beautiful! Once more she would be pleasant in his eyes. His! In comparison with whom all the world is poor.

To-night her gown is blue. A pale electric blue, that throws into purer prominence the startling fairness of her neck and arms. She is lingering now, touching her dress here, and moving a flower there, debating all the while what ornament shall have the honor of lying on her pretty bosom.

Some vague sense of evil had warned her against the cross. No, she would not wear that. It had distressed dear Lady Valworth, had whitened her face and made her kind lips stern; some old memory, sad and angry, had been brought to mind by it. Not only that first time when she had given way to an exclamation, but again that second time when he—Maurice—Mr. Duran had led her up to where she stood, Lady Valworth had seemed pained, sad, cold, unable to give her the kindly smile that, up to the wearing of that luckless cross, had ever greeted her. No; certainly she will not wear it—but——

There is the sapphire pendant. That lovely, sparkling thing that Paul, too, had given her, and that as yet has never graced her neck. True, he had warned her not to wear either it or the cross in common! He had got them through his business in some strange way he had failed to explain. They were valuable; too valuable to be worn publicly *as yet*, until he had made his fortune and hers. Too valuable to be worn at Mrs. Brand's, for example. He had, indeed, made her give him her promise not to wear them at Mrs. Brand's, and she had faithfully kept that promise.

But here! He had not surely calculated on the fact that she would ever be here—in such a house as this. If he had known, he would have been the first to tell her to make herself look as charming as was possible to her. He would have had her no whit behind the rest. The very fact that she does not love him has made her the more particular in the matter of obeying him, and now a little pang shoots across her heart as she wonders whether she had been deaf to his desires when she hung that diamond cross last night around her neck. Certainly it had brought her no delight—no luck. It had hurt Lady Valworth, her kind friend. It had hurt Duran, too, in some odd way. She could not tell how exactly, but he had asked her one or two questions about it, and had refrained

from praise of it, even when she laid it in his palm for inspection.

No ; not the cross. The sapphire pendant, rather. She lifts it from its case, and raises her arms above her head and clasps it round her neck. As she sees it glittering upon her lovely skin, she smiles softly to herself, and bends forward full of girlish delight at the beauty of it, and tells herself that Lady Valworth will be pleased to see her thus decked out to do honor to the home-coming of her son, Captain Boyle—this dearly loved son, who, to Nadine, is as yet unknown, but of whom she has heard so much.

With a last lingering glance at the mirror, that gives her back her charms so truly, she leaves the room. As yet it is early for the arrival of guests, and as she enters the huge ball-room she finds it almost deserted. The fiddlers are tuning their instruments in a monotonous lugubrious way, and one or two people are laughing at the lower end of the room. The lights as yet are dim, and Nadine can scarcely see them. She walks quickly in their direction, her heart beating gladly with a sense of youth and joy, that no misery in the future has power to kill. As she draws nearer the laughter she can see that her two or three have developed into a group. Duran is here, and Gerald Massareene ; Mrs. Brand and Millicent.

As Nadine comes up to them some of the servants turn up the lights to their fullest, and quite a glow of brightness is flung upon the room. Duran steps forward to greet Nadine. He says nothing to her, but only holds out his hand as if in welcome. In reality, the soft sweet beauty of her has entered into him and stricken him dumb. The lamps are shining upon her starry eyes, her red parted lips, her face so like a flower. The dainty, shy glance, that half bespeaks his praise and half decries it ; the lovely kissable mouth, that would fain say, "Am I not good to look at, dear, my love?" yet dreads to say it ; the bent, yet proud little head, the tender, longing smile, all appeal to him. His hand closes upon hers. She is *his* at this moment, whatever other forlorn times the years may hold for him and her, and with the eager hand-clasp he leads her forward to where the lamps shine clearest—to where all may see how fair his love can be.

He turns to make some gay remark to Millicent, still holding Nadine's hand, but a glance at Miss Grey's face checks him. She has grown positively livid. She was full

of laughter just a minute ago, but now all mirth has died from her, and her lips are set and stern, her color ghastly.

"Take her away—anywhere! Into the next room," she says, in a tone of suppressed but passionate command to Duran. There is no need for him to ask to whom she alludes—her eyes are riveted upon Nadine's neck, where the sapphire pendant is resting calmly. Duran, who is a man quick to understand, scenting danger in the air for her he loves, draws Nadine aside, and presently takes her out of the room altogether. A little too late, however. Mrs. Brand, too, had seen and recognized the sapphires!

The guests have all arrived, the ball is at its height. Yet still the hero of it is absent. There is, however, a midnight train that will in all probability bring him.

"It must. He has never failed me yet," says Lady Valworth, with a rather wan smile, who is feeling hurt and disappointed.

Millicent, who has been going about with a nervous distressed air all the night, has been regarded as a model *fiancée* by all her world. Plainly, she is fretting for her recreant lover. She has more feeling than they had given her credit for. She is not the heartless, soulless creature they had imagined! Yet her thoughts have never wandered to Granit; they have been centred on the pretty, happy creature who, with the stolen sapphires lying on her bosom, has been blissfully unconscious of the gathering storm that is so soon to break upon her.

Duran had made it a first care to learn the cause of Miss Grey's desire to get rid of Nadine as soon as her glance fell upon her in the ball-room. What he had been told since by Millicent had led him at once to a knowledge of the truth. He was already aware of the suspicion about the diamond cross worn by Nadine the night before. It is now impossible to him to disbelieve but that this lover of Nadine's—this Paul Annerley—had something to do with the robberies both of the diamonds from Valworth, and the famous sapphires from Park Lane. If this be true! If this be *proved!* He is angry with himself for the wild thrill of joy that rushes through every pulse, as this thought suggests itself and takes root within his breast. If it prove true! Why then Nadine will be free! This man, Annerley, will be compelled to fly from the face of the law, and she will be left behind for him—Duran—and for love!

But then the shame to her! The awakening to the sorrow of her lover's infamy. Sooner or later it must be told to her, but should the task be left to rude tongues who had no love for her? A thousand times no. Be the man falsely suspected, or be he in reality the one who has stolen the jewels, it is impossible that Nadine should be left to learn of the suspicion resting upon him from strangers. He—will tell her.

He has led her into a small conservatory leading off the tea-room, which, being rather public, has been deserted by those desirous of uttering or hearing tender passages. The upper end of it, overlooking in daytime a garden beneath, is quite removed from the gaze of those in the room outside, and Duran, as Nadine sinks upon a low couch, seats himself beside her.

A dim lamp, shaded to a subdued pink, sheds a warm but indistinct light around. The perfume of the dying roses fills the air. From far away the music comes to them—rising, falling, swelling, fainting, until all the night seems full of it.

Nadine, stooping toward him, lays her hand on his.

"You are troubled?" she says, softly. "I can see it in your eyes. Something is making you sorry."

Her eyes, deep and brilliant as stars, are looking mournfully into his. He possesses himself of the hand she has held out to him, believing him in trouble, and holds it fast.

"It is true. There is perplexity in my heart, and a suspicion of coming sorrow, but it is for you," he answers, gently.

"For me!" A little startled look creeps into her lovely face.

"Tell me—tell me exactly," says Duran, leaning forward so that he can see her face more clearly; "tell me, for your own sake, how you became the possessor of that sapphire heart that lies upon your neck?"

"What a strange question," cries she, paling. "It was given me—it was a present from Paul Annerley."

"And the diamond cross you wore last night—he gave you that also?"

"Yes; he gave me both." She has grown very white, and her large eyes are filled with a painful uncertainty. "Why do you question me about them?" she says. "Is it strange that I should have such pretty things? I did not want them—I do not care for them. But why is it *strange?*"

"The strangeness does not lie in your having them," returns Duran, still holding her hand fast, though she had tried to take it from him. "It lies in the fact that this Paul Annerley gave them to you. Where did he get them?"

"Ah! explain yourself!" implores she, rising to her feet and drawing back from him. "Your face, your voice, betray you! There is something terrible yet to be said. *Say it!*"

"There is this," says Duran, rising also. "The diamond cross you wore last night was stolen from Lady Valworth; the sapphires you wear to-night are part of the sapphire set that was taken from Miss Grey in Park Lane!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SILENCE, intense, horror-stricken, follows on his words. Miss Roche has fallen back from him, and is now leaning against the wall, with her hands clasped upon her bosom, and her eyes, large and affrighted, fixed on his.

"Stolen!" she says, the words coming with difficulty through her white lips. "Do they think *I* stole them?" She shrinks backward against the wall as though she would fain sink through it, and so disappear forever.

"Oh, no! Good heavens! *No!*" replies he, shocked. "But this man Annerley. It is essential that he should be found and compelled to say where he got them. You say you don't know his address, but surely it may be discovered."

"Have they been thinking *that?*" says Nadine, heedless of his last words. "And you, have you, too—" She breaks off as though the power to go on is lost to her. Her blanched face terrifies him.

"My darling! Don't look at me like that. Nadine! Who is accusing you? Who suspects you? Be reasonable."

"Lady Valworth suspects me. I see it all now, though I did not understand before why she was so cold to me all to-day. She thinks most cruelly, most unjustly of me. Oh! what shall I do?"

"Nothing now. To-morrow you must give us any help you can toward finding Mr. Annerley. No doubt," with a quick contraction of the brows, "he will be able to explain

to us in a satisfactory manner how these jewels came into his possession."

"What a terrible situation," says Nadine, faintly. She covers her eyes with her hands. "If I had only obeyed him. If I had followed his injunctions not to wear these fatal ornaments."

"He advised you not to wear them?" Duran's voice is sharp and keen.

"Yes. But only because he believed them too handsome for me, just now, when we were both poor. Afterward, he said, when he had made his fortune, they would suit me well."

"Did it not strike you that it was strange for a man calling himself poor to be able to purchase such costly things?"

"I did not think. I seldom thought of him." Her tone is low and self-reproachful. "How strong is fate," she says, presently. "To drive me here—to compel me to wear here what I had never worn before. But I am not regretful," cries she, suddenly, with a touch of vehemence. "He will be able to explain, *of course*. And now Lady Valworth and Millicent will get back their own."

She tears off the sapphire ornament and throws it into Duran's palm with a shudder.

"Oh! that I had never seen it," she cries, with a deep sigh. Again she covers her face with her hands. She had expressed boldly her belief in Annerley's power to explain away, in a satisfactory manner, his possession of these stones; but, in her own soul, this belief has had no ground. Can he, *dare* he come forward and give food for justice? Little acts, light words, return to her. Why had he forbidden her to wear these gifts of his? Why is his address unknown to her? He had led her to imagine him, if not quite a detective, at least as being employed in that line of business. Could the real thief—finding himself hunted surely down—have bribed him to defeat the ends of the law by inducing him to accept part of the jewels stolen?

And, again, his determination to leave England—to go abroad. His desire for a hurried marriage. Already was suspicion dogging his steps. Had he been given cause to think flight from his native land necessary? Oh! to think that she had been loved by, betrothed to, a felon! She cowers as these thoughts flash with a clear certainty across her brain—and then reaction comes. She has been too ready to accuse—to condemn. In a day or two she will

see him. She will tell him all. He will indeed be able, as she has declared to Duran, to say how and where the jewels came into his possession. He will be the very first to come forward and help in the restoration of the stolen gems.

While she has been working this out rapidly in her troubled brain Duran has been pacing to and fro, with lowered head and a frowning brow. Now he stops abruptly before Nadine.

"This man, you say, is abroad. When do you expect his return?" he asks, sternly.

"You speak disrespectfully of him. You already condemn him!" returns Nadine, coldly. "No man should be condemned without a hearing. He has been kind to me; I will not permit anyone to speak of him as guilty before me, until he be proved so."

"You are right. I beg your pardon. You teach me the nobler way," says Duran, stiffly. Her defence of Annerley is very bitter to him. Yet he must acknowledge the justice of her words. He turns away, and with a heart throbbing with wounded love and disappointment, trifles idly with a huge palm near him. If he had been living all this time in a fool's paradise? thinking her love his, however bound in honor she was to another! How now, if he lived to learn that this despised other is preferred before him, and that all her love, her sympathy, has gone out to *him*, now that a dark cloud has descended on him?

Suddenly, like a little flash, it comes to him that she is crying—not loudly, but miserably. Yet, even as he turns and makes a gesture as if to go to her, she checks her tears by an effort that is almost heroic, and waves him from her.

"No. Do not come nearer," she says, quickly, her eyes melancholy, growing deeper in the dull light, "until this dark suspicion is lifted from the man I have promised to marry. I, too, feel tainted."

"I will not allow you to use such a word when applied to yourself," says Duran, vehemently. "What have you to do with *him*—" Then he stops short. After all, as she has said, he is bringing the man to the bar before his crime has been proved upon him. He may be innocent of any complicity—and yet——

"I must see Lady Valworth. I must speak with her," exclaims Nadine, eagerly. Her cheeks are burning, her hands tremulous.

"Wait until to-morrow."

"I shall not wait another moment. I cannot *live* with this weight upon my heart." She presses her hands convulsively against her breast. "Take me to her," she implores, faintly.

Seeing the excitement that is betraying itself in glance and gesture, Duran draws her hand through his arm and leads her from the conservatory. The tea-room is now deserted, and they pass into the hall without encountering anybody. Midnight chimes from some distant tower, the solemn sound breaking even through the light sparkling dance music that comes from the ball-room on their left, and that swells and rings through the house.

"The last train is in. I am afraid Lady Valworth will be taken up with her son. He has surely arrived, or is on the point of arriving," says Duran to his companion in a low tone. "Nevertheless, we will try if it be possible to see her alone for even a few minutes."

A servant gives them the information that her ladyship has just passed into the library in momentary expectation of Captain Boyle's arrival. There they find her with Millicent, whom she has entreated to stay with her, and Sir Thomas.

As Nadine and Duran enter Sir Thomas is expostulating a little on his wife's desertion of her guests.

"It will be but for a little while, a few moments," returns she, eagerly. "He must, he *will* come by this train; and Clarissa" (Mrs. Brand) "has taken my place. I shall not be missed for half an hour, and he is sure to come straight here."

She looks up rather impatiently as Nadine comes into the room. The girl is white as death and trembling with agitation. Going up to Lady Valworth, she lays the sapphire pendant upon the table near her.

"Lady Valworth," she says, gently, her voice low and earnest, "it is only just now that I have heard from Mr. Duran about *this*," pointing to the sapphires. "And your diamond cross—it is upstairs—you shall have it in a few moments. But what I want to say is—is—" She falters. It is evident in her excitement she has forgotten what it was she had arranged to say. "I knew nothing of it," she breaks out at last, pitifully, her large eyes fixed with mournful entreaty upon Lady Valworth.

That kind woman is touched to the quick. Indeed, she had never suspected Nadine of being anything but a victim in the matter, although her perplexity during the day

had led her into a coldness of manner that the girl had misconstrued.

"My dear child, what a miserable idea for you to get into your head!" she cries, kindly. "Come, now, I will have only happy faces round me to-night, when my son is expected. It is his birth-night, as you know; we must give him only smiles. As for our lost jewels, to-morrow you will give me any information you can, and probably *you* will be the one to restore them to me."

She presses Nadine's hand kindly.

"You should not have told her to-night!" exclaims Millicent, looking reproachfully at Duran.

"Oh, it is better so—much better," says Nadine. "It would have been horrible to wear that stolen ornament a moment longer."

"You say you got it—as—as a present, in fact—from—er—the gentleman to whom you are engaged?" says Sir Thomas, in a magisterial manner.

He is burning with curiosity to learn whatever news she may be able to give him of the lost heirlooms.

"Yes," replies Nadine, faintly.

"He—er—did not tell you, I suppose, where he had—er—purchased them?"

"No."

"Very odd—very odd, indeed!" says Sir Thomas.

"Well, I don't know," says Gerald Massareene, who had come in in search of Millicent. "A fellow doesn't, as a rule, Sir Thomas, expatiate upon his gifts to the woman he loves."

He speaks in his cheeriest manner, with a view to sustaining Nadine, and is rewarded by a bright smile from Millicent.

"True—very true," says Sir Thomas. "Yet, if Miss Roche will pardon me, it strikes me as being peculiar that—er—a gentleman of ordinary means, such as she has represented her future husband to be, should have been able to purchase such—er—expensive ornaments."

"They were probably disposed of to obscure houses, and might be thus purchased more cheaply," hazards Millicent.

"I think not—nay, I am sure not," says Sir Thomas, pompously. "Such diamonds as my lady's are, as a rule, I understand, broken up and the setting entirely destroyed before thieves would venture to dispose of them at all. They were *famous*, my dear Millicent. There are few

purer in England. What I should imagine is, that—er—the gentleman to whom our friend"—with a courteous bow to Nadine—"is engaged, got them in some strange, but I have no doubt perfectly honorable way"—with another bow—"and that he will be able to explain when we see him, and put us in the right path for the capture of the burglars."

"It must have been the same gang who carried off Miss Grey's sapphires," says Massareene.

"Doubtless," returns Sir Thomas. "I have now great hopes that, with our little friend's assistance"—patting Nadine's hand—"we shall be able to recover both sets. And—er—what did you say was the name of that gentleman, my dear?"

"Annerley—Paul Annerley."

"A very good name in the North. Quite so. And where does he live?"

"He is abroad now," says Nadine, nervously.

Oh! *why* did she never learn his address? How careless, how indifferent she must have been! She feels the inevitable question is coming, and how can she explain her ignorance?

"But I hear he is returning immediately. If you will give me his home address," says Sir Thomas, taking out a pencil and drawing a sheet of paper toward him, preparatory to taking it down, "I shall go up to town myself tomorrow and make the proper inquiries."

Nadine is silent.

"H'm?" murmurs Sir Thomas, interrogatively, glancing up at her from under his bent brows.

"I do not know it," says Nadine, coldly.

She is trembling with nervousness. How can they believe she does not know where the man lives to whom she is engaged to be married?

"Not know it?" exclaims Sir Thomas, in a curious tone. "Surely, my dear Miss Roche, you have, at least, some idea about it."

"His office is somewhere in the City."

"And his home? His rooms? His house?"

"I do not know where he lives."

There is a very decided pause. Sir Thomas raises his brows and shrugs his shoulders slowly. He is evidently both puzzled and disappointed, and, besides, suspicious. Lady Valworth has drawn away a little from the shrinking girl. Gerald Massareene and Millicent look at each other

in dismay. Duran alone is undisturbed in mien. He alone believes her.

Millicent, taking a step forward, lays her hand on Nadine's arm.

"This is folly—madness!" she whispers, hurriedly. "If you are trying to shield him, it is useless; you will not succeed, and you are only drawing down suspicion on yourself. Say where he lives, and quickly. Or tell me. I will explain why you tried to hide it—*everything!*"

She waits anxiously for an answer, but none comes. Sir Thomas, with an increase of the magisterial solemnity, advances a step or two.

"I regret you cannot help us, Miss Roche," he says, gravely. "You now compel us to discover this—er—Mr. Annerley for ourselves."

At this moment the door is thrown wide open, and a tall man enters the room. Lady Valworth, with a little cry, rushes forward to greet him. She has forgotten everything, except that this is her son, and that he has returned to her.

But a movement on Nadine's part checks her. The girl, too, after an instant's stunned surprise, has taken a few steps forward and thrown out her arms in the direction of the new comer.

"Why! There he is! There he is himself!" she cries, in a clear voice, touched by excitement. "Now he is come, he will explain all!"

"He! What should he have to explain?" demands Lady Valworth, stopping short and fixing a stern glance upon her.

"He will tell you how he got the diamonds, the sapphires, that he gave me!" returns Nadine eagerly, her eyes brilliant, her lips apart.

Some color has risen to her face.

"What farce is this you would play, girl?" exclaims Lady Valworth, in a low but terrible tone. "That"—pointing to where the tall figure stands in the door-way—"is *my son*—Granit Boyle!"

"Madam! that is—*Paul Annerley!*"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Granit Boyle, his face absolutely livid, comes straight into the centre of the room. The glaring chandelier betrays the deadly pallor of his face, the cold gleam in his

eyes. He has had sufficient time, during the troubled words that passed between his mother and Nadine, to understand that the game has been played out and lost. He might still deny, give oath on oath, put all to the touch, and defy actual discovery; but to what end? Who would believe him innocent among those with whom he cares to associate, even should the law absolve him? In the future the fate of the outcast, the leper, would be his. *She* would be the chief witness for the prosecution—*she*, with her soft voice, her pure eyes! What chance would he have against her, even though judge and jury acquit him? His world would believe in her. And it is this same voice that has betrayed him—the dearest voice on earth to him!

He goes slowly up to the girl who has ruined him and lays his hand upon her shoulder. For the moment it seems he has forgotten that there is anyone in the world but her.

"You!—*you* here!" he says.

There is immeasurable surprise, but no anger in his tone. His glance dwells upon her lingeringly, tenderly as ever. He is lost in one of the old dreams. It is his last!

"Tell them!" entreats Nadine, eagerly. "They have been imagining dreadful things. I told them you were returning to England soon, but I did not know it would be to-night. Paul, let them know at once—*at once*—how those stones came into your possession."

In her extreme anxiety, she lays her hand upon his arm. Duran makes a movement toward her, but Massareene, by a gesture, stops him.

"You still believe in me, then?" says Boyle, in a curious tone. "You have had faith all through? You have never understood?"

"I do not understand now," cries the girl, nervously. "Oh! what is this?" She shrinks from him, and presses her hand against her heart. "Why do you not speak?" she cries again, affrightedly. "One word will reassure me. Yet you are silent, How pale you are! What horrible thing am I to learn? Lady Valworth has called you her son. Oh! surely that is——"

"Madness on the part of Lady Valworth," interrupts he, with a short laugh. "To disown me would have been her wiser plan."

"What is this you say?" cries Nadine, in a low voice, faint, horrified. "You do not deny that you are Granit Boyle?"

"No."

"You are not, then, Paul Annerley?"

"That is true."

Nadine staggers back from him, and presses her hands to her forehead as if in pain.

"And what of this, sir?" demands Sir Thomas, coming forward.

He has lost all his pompousness, his magisterial air has deserted him. He looks old, distressed, shocked. Every now and then he glances back to where his wife is sitting, with her arms thrown upon the table near her and her head lying humbled upon them. He has taken up the sapphire pendant, and holds it out to Granit Boyle upon a shaking palm.

"You—did you give this to Miss Roche?"

"Miss Roche has said so."

The tone is contemptuous: the glance that accompanies it rather more so.

"And—Lady Valworth's diamond cross that this young lady wore last night?"

Sir Thomas' voice is even more tremulous now. He would gladly have spared "my lady" (as he always fondly calls her) *this;* but it is better the truth should be at once known, if possible.

"I gave that also to Miss Roche."

There is a pause, startling because of the intensity of the silence that masks it. It is broken at last by Granit. He bursts into laughter—light, reckless, defiant.

"The game is up," he says. "Miss Roche has forged the first link of the chain of evidence against me; the rest should be easily made. I shall save you all trouble by giving you the exact facts gratis. I took the diamonds! I took also the sapphires! Ha! my pretty cousin!" turning his handsome head to where Millicent is standing, and laughing gayly. "As often as you acted with me in private theatricals, you little guessed how well I could sustain a part, even a difficult one, if I threw my whole will into it. I must apologize to you for that handkerchief, by the way. I could have wished it were a finer one; but an actor must be perfect even in the minor details, and a burglar should not be acquainted with cambric."

Here Massareene makes a dash forward, but is restrained by Duran.

"Let us hear him out," entreats the latter, wisely.

"Don't waste your superfluous energy on me, Mas-

sareene," says Boyle, lightly. "I'm not good enough. Keep it! And after all, I am hardly a rival. My charming cousin cared for me as I cared for her. I had no intention whatsoever of depriving you of her."

"You are a damned scoundrel!" says Massareene, flinging off Duran, and advancing to Boyle, his face white with rage.

"Beyond doubt!" replies the other, with a shrug.

"Stand back, Gerald! Why should you bandy words with such as him?" says Miss Grey, in a cold, haughty tone. A step places her between the two men. "So, sir!" she says, addressing Granit, "while holding openly to your engagement with me, and declaring it loudly to the world, you were carrying on an intrigue under a false name—of which this poor girl was to be the victim!"

"Far from it!" replies her cousin, coolly. "*You* were to be the victim! I had no intention whatsoever of marrying you. I had—I *have*—every intention of marrying Miss Roche!"

Nadine starts violently.

Quick to see and judge, he notices her emotion, and turns to her.

"I have your promise," he goes on in a low tone full of meaning; then, again, lets his glance fall upon Sir Thomas. "Well! how is it to be?" he asks, recklessly. "On which count am I to be first arraigned? The diamonds? Is my mother to be the first to cast a stone? It is only just! *Seniores priores.*"

Lady Valworth lifts her head from her arms, and looks at him.

Those who see her face never afterward forget how it was then. The agony, the despair, the deadly cold of it, all burn themselves into the memory.

"Oh, Granit! Granit! Granit!"

The mournful cry rises and rings through the room. It is a cry from a broken heart!

Silence follows on it.

The gray head has again fallen forward upon the outstretched arms.

If the son is moved by this evidence of the cruelty of his mother's grief, he gives no sign of it. With a face, marble, indeed, and quite colorless, and therefore impassive, he waits to receive an answer to his question from Sir Thomas.

His step-father, now utterly unnerved, motions to him to leave the room.

"Prosecution is impossible," he says, hurriedly. "All that is left you is to quit this house and this country with as little delay as possible. This is the only kindness you can show—*her*."

He points to the motionless figure of his wife.

"A kindness that will cost me little," replies the young man with a callous smile. "Already my plans are arranged to leave England for a foreign soil, never, I hope, to return to it. On the twenty-fourth, Nadine and I sail for Canada."

Nadine recoils from him.

"You must be mad!" she says. "Why do you now link your name with mine?"

"It is premature, certainly. But on the twenty-third it will be linked with mine forever!"

"Oh, no!"

"This little affair has affrighted you?" says Boyle, with a dark glance. "In a distant land, under different circumstances, you will readily forget it."

"Forget—*this night?*"

"And all, and everyone belonging to it."

"You hope too much."

"This hope is my life! It *shall not* be too much! You shrink now; your woman's heart fails you; but in the time to come there will be no room left for regret. Joy shall fill your days. Come, take courage."

"Not for such cause as this."

"A truce to folly!" cries he, with a flash of passion. "I tell you you are mine, and shall follow me where I go. Have you forgotten your oath—your promise?"

"That promise was given to Paul Annerley," returns she, firmly.

"That promise was given to me! To *me*—do you hear? whether my name be Granit Boyle, or Paul Annerley, or —the devil! Come!"—Going nearer to her, he grasps her hand, "I cannot speak to you with all these gaping fools around; come to some other room."

He drags her toward the door, not brutally, but with determination.

Duran, going quickly up, by a sudden sharp wrench delivers her from him. He would perhaps have done more, but that Nadine's agonized glance of entreaty restrains him. This glance fortunately Boyle fails to see.

"Who are you to dare to interfere?" he cries, savagely, glancing at Duran. "Keep back! This matter is between me and Miss Roche."

His gaze returns to Nadine, and again it rests upon her; he seems to forget all but her—his crime, his ruin, his coming exile!

"Nadine!" he says, and his voice has grown wonderfully soft. "Think, my beloved! Would you cast me off now?—*now*, when the world has cast me off? See! I would not plead to you, I would not throw myself so altogether on your mercy—even though that mercy means the saving of my soul—but that I know no other man is dearer to you than I. Your own lips have told me this. Your voice as you gave me the blessed assurance, still rings in my ears!"

Duran, who has been standing near her, with his eyes upon the ground, lifts them slowly now, and fixes them upon Nadine. He has grown very pale.

Nadine is standing with white lips and raised head, her glance riveted upon Boyle, as though fascinated.

"That I have not gained your entire heart, I know," continues Granit, in the same low, but impassioned tone. "But I am satisfied with the knowledge that no other has gained it. Come! what is there to wait for in this land? Your heart, if not quite mine, is still your own. If you follow me, it is to gain a slave who will call your lightest wish a dear command. *Come!*"

Again he takes her hand. Softly this time—with gentlest care; and the girl, as though in a dream, suffers herself to be led toward the door. A step or two she goes, then stops confusedly, and raising one little pink palm, presses it convulsively to her brow.

"You hesitate, my love! But why, why?" whispers he, still with his glowing eyes on hers, his grasp growing warmer. "Nay, consider! Would you send me out into the cold, the dark, forlorn, lost, without the one sweet thing I crave, whose presence will restore to me light, and hope, and joy? Oh! have pity, love! And remember, too, you *are* mine! Mine only! If I have sinned, it was to gain means to make a home for you elsewhere. For you I have resigned fortune, home in my own country, honor—all! Now, when every man's hand is against me, you, at least, will not draw back?"

A shiver runs through Nadine; this lying speech, false in all but the wild love that speaks through it, stirs her frame and holds her against her will. All power of volition seems gone from her. She suffers her hand to lie passively in his; like sobs her breath rushes from her

breast. As though conquered by a superior power, she lets herself be led slowly but surely toward the door, beyond which lies captivity. She feels numbed, senseless. She would fain cry aloud; but some strange inward force strikes her dumb. Already the threshold is reached.

She pauses mechanically.

The anguish in the eyes always fixed so immovably on Boyle's warns him it is best to humor her for the moment. That she is on the verge of fainting is apparent to him.

"For all this, I will repay you with the service of a lifetime," he whispers eagerly. "My beloved, collect your strength. Trust to me wholly. And think—think always of the blessedness of the work before you! I will repent for your sake. I will lead from henceforth a godly life—for your sweet sake! Oh, Nadine! my very soul is yours to make or mar! Your promise to me! You shall think of that too! It gave you to me; it made you mine! Mine for all eternity! Come! Together we must be *forever!*"

Again he endeavors to draw her across the threshold.

"Never!"

The word rings out loud, and clear, and desperate. And then even clearer, and filled with a passionate entreaty:

"*Maurice!*" she cries, in a tone that thrills the hearts of all present.

CHAPTER XXV.

Duran is at her side in an instant. He has encircled her with his arms. Her head has fallen upon his breast. He looks at Boyle as though prepared to dispute him for her to the death; but there is no occasion for him to be on the defensive. When that cry, when the word "Maurice," has rushed from her lips, Granit, as though he had received a mortal wound, had loosed his hold of her, and now stands apart from them, staring vacantly at the half-unconscious girl. This he had never suspected. That her heart was not his, he knew; that it was in the keeping of another burst upon him now for the first time, without a moment's warning, and crushes out of him his last hope.

There is something terrible in the glance he has bent upon her. He has apparently given no thought to Duran, though in him he finds his rival; all his thoughts are centred on Nadine. As if she feels the powerful concentra-

tion of his regard, she shivers in Duran's arms, and slowly lifts her head. Her eyes meet Boyle's.

"*So!*" he says, and no more.

There is such a cruel meaning in the one word he has uttered, that Nadine, freeing herself from Duran's restraining grasp, goes forward as if to refute in person whatsoever he may dare to insist upon. Yet, as she draws near to him, the extreme agony of his expression touches, and forbids her to say anything that may hurt or wound.

"Stand back!" says Boyle, in a low tone. "Do not come near me. If you touch me, I will not answer for myself. Probably I shall kill you."

"Paul!"

She has forgotten everything save the despair that *she* has brought to him, and that stands marked upon his pallid face.

"I warn you to keep away," repeats he, in the same dull, methodical tone as before. "If you spoke forever, you could not tell me more than I know now. It is too late to cajole or deceive me further. You must be satisfied with the old victory."

"If you would but listen——"

"To believe again—to be again undone? Be warned!" cries he, with a sudden access of violent passion. "If you approach one step nearer, if your treacherous voice sounds once more upon my ear, I will dash your false brains against that wall opposite!" He draws his breath fiercely, and his hands work together in a convulsive frenzy. "*Traitress!*" he whispers, a cold fury in his tone; "how has it been between us? I gave you *all*—my love, my life, my hopes. You gave me a serpent's smile and glances false as hell! With desire in your heart for another, you held out a hand to me, and swore you knew not the meaning of the strange word love! Stand back, I tell you, if life is still of value to you! Nay, not a word! Treacherous devil though you are, I would still spare you!"

"If you would only let me tell you how——"

She has placed her hand appealingly on his. With a sudden cry, wild as though coming from a beast hurt unto death, he seizes her, and flinging her far from him, sends her with a crash against the furthest wall.

She drops like a stone to the ground.

Duran, holding her to his heart, looks round. Boyle is no longer to be seen. Without waiting to learn the consequences of his fury, he had rushed from the room.

. . . . . .

"Well, at last my duty is at an end; my final guest has departed. I can now rest my weary limbs," says Miss Grey some hours later, sinking into a chair as she speaks.

"You look awfully done," returns Massareene, with deep solicitude.

"I *am* tired. I confess it. With all this anxiety upon my mind, to be obliged to go about among the guests and apologize to them for poor Lady Valworth's absence, was more trying than I knew. Auntie was of no help at all. She was thoroughly upset herself, and for the first hour unpresentable. Then she rallied a little, but to hardly any purpose. Oh, Gerald! what a terrible evening this has been!"

"It has had its good side, however. You are free."

"Free—yes."

"To let me love you."

"I have had no time to think of that." She regards him earnestly for a moment. "You will compel me to believe you selfish," she says, slowly.

"Is it selfish to consider above everything the welfare of the one best beloved? If so, I plead guilty. I tell you I have thought of nothing since—since Boyle's *exposé*—but the fact that you have been delivered out of the hands of such a man."

"One must think of Nadine."

"How is she now?"

"Well, but still terrified. His violence did her no bodily harm, but she is oppressed by nervous horror, and will not consent to remain alone for even a moment. She is now in the morning-room with Mr. Duran and auntie."

"You were surprised about Duran?"

"Weren't you? When she called out to him that time, and when he caught her in his arms, I could hardly believe my senses. Well, it is a good exchange for her. Maurice Duran is handsome, and rich, and—her heart's chosen. She is a lucky girl!"

"Are you unlucky?" He asks the question wistfully, looking down at her with his plain, kindly face rather disturbed. "I am ugly and poor, and not altogether sure that I am the chosen of her who is all the world to me."

"Oh! you are *you!*" returns she, sententiously. "And as for Maurice Duran, I would not marry him, even if he had the grace to ask me."

"And you *will* marry me?" eagerly.

"Time will prove that."

She laughs at him a little saucily from under her long lashes, and holds out to him a hand with such dainty sweetness as brings him to her feet at once.

"My darling girl!"

"A darling girl, no doubt; but not yours yet, however."

"And why not, since you are free?"

"I was quite free all along, it seems!" exclaims she, with a quick flash of wounded pride, that brings the hot blood to her cheeks. She springs from her seat, and paces rapidly up and down the room. Presently she stops short before him, and lifts her dark, angry eyes to his. "I wonder you have not too much pride to care for the woman who was despised by that thief!" she says, with angry excitement.

"I care for Millicent Grey. It is absurd to dwell upon such a thing," returns he, strongly.

"Shall I ever forget it, I wonder—to be rejected by such as he! To learn from his own lips that I was merely used as a blind; that while paying attention to me his whole heart and soul were devoted to another!"

"But what a soul and heart! you should consider that."

"The meaner they are, the more I resent his conduct. And to say it before them all—my aunt, Lady Valworth, Sir Thomas, *you!* When he thus scorned me publicly, with that evil smile upon his lips, I had only one wish left."

"And that?"

"That I were a man, to thrust the words back in his throat and kill him."

"And yet you held me from him at the moment He is still in the house, however. I will compel him to apologize—to—" begins the hot Irishman, making for the door.

"No, it would be useless," interposes she quickly. "It is done, it cannot be undone, and surely his mother has suffered enough. There must be no further disturbance."

"I can follow him, however."

"I tell you, you could never undo what is done. Let him go; he is not worth notice. I should be ashamed to confess that his sting hurt me. And we are bound to remember his mother."

"Ah! poor Lady Valworth! She indeed is the one to be pitied."

"So you would say, could you see her now."

"Where is she?"

"In her own room. Sir Thomas was with her. His

grief for her was very touching, but she seemed, I thought, impatient under it. She looked old, crushed, broken!"

Millicent turns aside, but not before he can see that the hot tears are running down her cheeks.

"Poor woman!" says he, softly. And then: "My darling, you are worn out. You have been thinking for everyone. Let me now think for you. You want rest. Let me persuade you to lie down for a little while."

"It would be useless. I could not sleep. The very air is heavy with trouble. As long as that man remains in the house I hardly know how any of us can breathe."

"That difficulty will be conquered in a few hours. He will leave, of course, by the early train."

"I suppose so. His *poor* mother!"

"Millicent! Try to forget it all for a while at least. Think of something else—" he pauses and looks at her entreatingly. "Could you not think of me?"

"If I hadn't you to think of I should go mad," returns she, with sudden soft vehemence. She holds out her hands to him. "You are my one comfort," she whispers, brokenly.

They do not hear the door open, and indeed she is still in his arms when Mrs. Brand's voice falls on their ears.

"Is *this* what you call 'taking a little rest'?" she asks, with deep reproach. There is, however, no anger in her tone—she looks too sad, too depressed for any open demonstrations of annoyance.

"Mrs. Brand," says Massareene, advancing eagerly toward her," you know how it is with me and Millicent. You must have known for a long time. Now that this most unhappy affair has left her once again her own mistress, do not refuse to let me plead my cause."

Mrs. Brand has sunk into a chair.

"You are very persistent," she says, tapping her fingers upon the table near.

"Because I am very much in love."

"And Millicent?"

"I dare to hope that she—has found some room in her heart for me."

"Let her speak for herself," says Mrs. Brand, with a faint touch of impatience. "Well, Millicent, how is it with you?"

"I love him, auntie," says Miss Grey, demurely. "I can't help that, can I? And—I wouldn't if I could! He is not rich, of course, but money isn't everything. I have

been very dutiful up to this. That you must allow." She says nothing of the secret passages between her and Massareene, and of the determination lately come to, to defy the world of relations for his sake. "Once you chose for me"——

She pauses. Mrs. Brand sighs.

"That choice was not altogether happy."

Still Mrs. Brand is silent.

"I think perhaps if I were to choose for myself this time, it would be better."

At this her aunt rouses herself.

"I had hoped to see you make a great alliance," she says mournfully. "You, with your fortune, and—and that unfortunate young man, with his prospect of an earldom. All is shattered now. Everything is at an end. But still there would be a brilliant future before you if——"

"I shall not give up Gerald," says Millicent, drawing back from her somewhat coldly. "You and Uncle Timothy can leave your money to whom you will; I shall certainly marry Gerald."

Massareene, coming forward, takes her hand and lifts it to his lips. There is a great warmth and gladness in the gaze he directs at Mrs. Brand.

Perhaps she gives it its value. So true, so unmercenary a love as this, is not to be despised in the money-worshipping world in which she moves.

"Of course, if you have quite made up your mind," she says with hesitation, looking at Millicent. There is something new and beautiful in the girl's face that attracts her. Love has transfigured it! After all it may be best for her darling to abjure ambition and cleave only to love. "You will be good to her, Gerald?" she says in a low voice.

Massareene, who is looking grave, regards her earnestly.

"I shall always love her," he says, "if that is what you mean!"

"You give your consent, auntie?" asks Millicent, kneeling on the carpet beside her and encompassing her with her arms.

"Yes. My meddling resulted in so dire a failure I dare not try again. I am glad you have chosen a man who, if poor, is at least one who I believe will make you happy. One, too, whom I like and esteem. Ah! my dear! to be able to *respect* your husband is a great matter. Gerald! see that she can always do that. And as for your Uncle

Timothy, darling, I think I shall be able to arrange him." She stoops forward and kisses Millicent fondly.

"And now where am I to go?" says the poor woman, in a melancholy tone. "I left the morning-room because I felt sure that Duran wanted to come to an understanding with Nadine, and now you two lovers are wishing me—well, anywhere out of this."

"Nonsense! We shall never wish for your absence," cries Millicent, tenderly. "Stay with us always, just as long as ever you like, dear mother of mine!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

It is a very pale and fragile Nadine who sits looking at Duran in the morning-room. Her eyes are frightened—there is a sense of insecurity in the way she moves her slender hands one within the other, casting every now and then a nervous glance toward the door.

Mrs. Brand's departure, though kindly meant by that good woman, had only served to render higher the fear that has been consuming Nadine ever since her last interview with Granit Boyle. It seems to her impossible that he will return to her, to renew his wild pleadings—to perhaps carry her off with him, despite her passionate resistance. In Duran she has trust; but with the comfort derived from her faith in him, lies the horror of his again coming face to face with Boyle. A collision between the two men might—nay, probably would—end disastrously. Her mind is distraught. She is filled with a cruel anxiety. Oh! if they should meet! The discarded lover—the one she loves! What would be the end of it? She cannot find comfort in the love so newly gained, so fondly desired, when she dwells upon the love she hates, and has discarded, and that is yet so near to her that she dreads the vengeance of it.

"Nadine! why do you turn from me? Why is your face so pale? Perhaps," says Duran, rising to his feet with a touch of dignity, "you would rather I left you."

"Oh, no, no!" cries she, eagerly. She rises too, and lays her trembling hands upon his arm. Involuntarily she glances toward the door. "Do not leave me," she whispers, wildly. "If you do, *he* will come."

"I think not. I believe you have really seen the last of

him. What a blessed chance it was, his coming here direct. Otherwise he would still have held you to your word, and you would have been married to him, and——"

"Don't!" says the girl, faintly.

"Forgive me, darling, I should not have so spoken. And yet it is better you should realize it."

"Oh! poor Lady Valworth!" cries she, with a shudder; "shall I ever forget her face?"

"In time I hope you will forget everything connected with this night, except that it gave you to me. When I think of that, I grow——"

"I could think of it, too," interrupts she, nervously, "if—if he were once *gone*. But the knowledge that he is still under the same roof with me—that at any moment he may appear—makes the blood grow chill within my veins!" She presses both her hands against her heart, as though to still its throbbings. "If he should come here!" she whispers, feebly.

"Well! If he should—I, too, am here," responds Duran, calmly. Her excitement renders him uneasy for her. "See here," he says. "Do you believe it possible that he will seek your presence again? I tell you he will not. His game is played out. All is over with him. But if you still are frightened, darling, come with me to Lady Valworth's boudoir; that I know is deserted, because it was given over to the guests to-night, and being a specially comfortless apartment, nobody will dream of seeking you there. Will you come?"

"Oh, yes, yes! Anywhere is better than this," breathes she, faintly. She steals her hand into his, and goes with him across the inner hall. At every step she starts, and once, when a sound more pronounced than usual smites upon her ear, she clings to his arm with both her pretty hands. To the lover leading her it occurs that she must have held in detestation the lover lost.

"Now you are safe," says he, smiling. He presses her gently into a huge arm-chair, and stirs into a glow the dying embers of the fire. A chill has fallen upon the night. As the warmth comes to her, as she realizes that here perhaps Granit will not seek her, as she sees the beloved face of Duran leaning over her, she lets a sense of joy and comfort steal through her being, and as a child, tired and weary, who sees its mother, might do, she stretches out her arms to Duran. In a moment she is lying on his breast.

"Oh, to be here!" she cries, faintly. "To be here—in your arms—*safe*. You will never let me go, will you? You will not let him take me from you?"

"Never, while life is in me! But I do not wish to see you so unnerved, my dearest. Come, take heart! Consider! In these prosaic days a girl cannot be torn from her home by any chance comer. Even if you were alone, you could resist him, because your promise to him has now been cancelled; but even if it had not been so, still I am here, your guardian and—*your lover*."

"Oh! if he were only gone!" she says. Her answer, though merely born of the last degree of an extreme agitation, offends Duran.

"I am insufficient for you," he says, coldly, releasing her. "I was, perhaps, immature when I persuaded myself that I might gain your love. You are but a child, after all. I am thirty-six. I am too old for you."

An expression of intense surprise crosses her face.

"Why do you speak to me like this? What have I done to merit it, Maurice? How have I deserved that cross little speech?"

She slips her hand into his with a tender pleading in her eyes. Duran gives in to her pretty entreaty.

"Still, it is true, my beloved," he says; "I am too old for you."

"What has age to do with it? I love you as you are. Whether you are ninety or nineteen is nothing to me—I love you all the same."

"My sweetheart!"

"That is a pretty word. If I am your sweetheart, you, too, are mine."

"I wish I were younger, for your dear sake."

"I would not have you changed in any way. If you were a year younger you would not be the one I love. Just as you are now, I wish you to be."

"And what am I now?"

"My own Maurice!" She slips her arm round his neck. She is yet in her ball-gown, and it is a soft, bare little arm, rounded as a baby's, that encircles him. He turns his head to kiss it tenderly.

"It is a terrible thought," says Duran, presently, "and I am honestly ashamed of it; but I cannot help feeling that this miserable night's work has been our salvation. It is cruel to rejoice when others are so unhappy. And yet——"

"Poor Lady Valworth!" whispers Nadine, tears rising to her eyes. And then, very softly, "Poor Paul, too!"

"There is no such person. Forget that he ever existed, even in your imagination," says Duran, with a frown. He regards her earnestly, jealously. "Have you still even pity for him?" he asks, moodily.

"*That*, indeed, I have."

"You know what pity is akin to?"

"Love for him I never had," returns she, simply. "Is it likely I should feel it now? But from my soul I pity one who has fallen from high estate to so low a level. Ah! think, Maurice, what despair must lie within his breast."

"True! He has lost *you*. Pity, then, must be accorded him. Yet I would not have you to be the one to feel it. Can you not forget him?" He draws nearer to her, and taking one hand, clasps it firmly in both his. "Tell me," says he, with an effort, "did he—used he—kiss you?"

"Often." She tells the truth bravely, but her face blanches. Will he forgive it? "Do not be angry with me. He was to have been my husband. I could not prevent it."

"No; I suppose not. And you——" He pauses, as though it is impossible for him to proceed.

"I? Oh no! I never kissed him. Never once. Never at all. With all my heart I tried to conquer it; but I could not overcome the fear of him that rankled within me." She lays her disengaged hand upon his shoulder. "See," she says sweetly, "why will you vex yourself with such regrets? You tell *me* to forget—can you not do likewise? My love was never his for even a moment. It is all yours. Will not this suffice?" Tears rise to her eyes.

"It shall—it does!" cries Duran passionately. "How do I dare to find a fault in my present fortune? Yesterday I was the most miserable man alive—you were lost to me! To-night, I am the happiest—you are gained! For the future, let us banish from us all thoughts, save those that remind us that by a most strange chance we have been given to each other just when hope seemed dead."

CHAPTER XXVII.

Joy there, misery here!

Lady Valworth pushes back the *portière*, and with a slow and heavy tread advances to where the motionless figure is

seated upon a chair, his head buried on the arms that are lying upon the table.

"Granit!" whispers she tremulously.

He starts to his feet with an oath, and turns a stormy face to hers.

"What, cannot I be left alone even now? What brings you here? Is there no rest—no peace?"

"It is only I, my dear—your mother!" Her voice breaks. "Oh, my child! my son! my darling! It is your mother, dear—your own mother! Did you think anything could make any difference to *me?*" The poor woman flings herself on the ground beside him, and encircles him with her arms. "I knew you were alone," she goes on eagerly. "I would have come sooner, but I—I was not very well. The moment I could, however, I came to you. I could not bear to picture you sitting here all by yourself, and perhaps believing your poor mother was holding aloof."

"You had done better had you so held yourself."

"Oh, Granit! do not so speak to me! Do not repulse me!" She is still kneeling beside him, trying to draw his dark, sullen face to look at her; and now she takes his hand and holds it in a fondling fashion against her bosom. He is once more her child, her boy, her little one; in trouble and disgrace—in direst grief—and to whom, then, should he come but to his mother? "My darling, why did you not trust me?" she says in a low, painful whisper. "I would have *given* them to you. I could have managed in some way. Yes—I would have given them."

"They were not yours to give"—this allusion to the stolen diamonds hardens his heart again, though not toward her—"they belonged to Sir Thomas. However"—breaking off savagely, and dragging his hand roughly out of hers—"it is too late to discuss what is over and done. If you have come here to maunder about my crimes, I warn you I will have none of it."

"No, no, dear; not another word shall be said." Going closer to him she tries to press him into a chair. "Sit down now, and let us talk of your plans," she whispers soothingly.

"Plans?" He glances at her vaguely, as though he hardly understands; plainly he has not been listening. Then suddenly his face flushes; the veins swell upon his temples. "Where is *she?*" he cries in a vehement tone.

"She? Millicent?"

"Pshaw! No. She—*she* who betrayed me; that fair devil, Nadine."

"She is down-stairs. She has been very ill," says the mother, trembling.

"Did I hurt her? Did she feel? Did she suffer?" His tone is exultant, yet there is a fierce agony in it. "I hope so. Great heaven! how that girl lied to me, though her lips uttered no falsehood. She gave herself to me; she swore she would marry me, caring for that other all the time. Did you mark how she shrunk and cowered away from me? How she paled, and glanced at me as though perdition lay in the sight of me?"

He is glancing over his mother's shoulder toward the opposite wall. His eyes are dark and wild; he is gazing at something. That past scene in the library is again before him—is again being enacted—brought to life by his disordered fancy.

"Granit, think of something else," implores his mother, in a frightened manner. His voice, his gestures, terrify her.

"From me she shrunk—to turn to *him!* How her eyes lit as she saw him! To him she cried for protection from me! She held out her arms to him! She clung to him!" His breath is coming in painful gasps. "There was adoration in the glance she directed at him! To gain such a glance *I* would have died. Well"—he stretches out his arms and then clasps his head—"because of such a glance I *have* died. She has slain me!"

"Granit, my poor boy, do not talk so wildly. Forget this girl; think now of what is the best thing for you to do."

"I have thought of that—that is all arranged."

His tone is impatient.

"Where are you going, darling?" asks she, faintly.

"Nowhere."

His manner is dull and listless.

"Rouse yourself," entreats she; "you *must* go for a while. You say you have arranged all. Tell me, then, where you are going."

"A long, long journey."

"Long journeys nowadays can be compassed in a very little while."

"That is true. Mine will be the shortest passage on record." He draws his breath sharply. "What happened to—*her*, when I left?"

"She fainted. Mr. Duran——"

"Keep his name out of it, can't you?" interrupts he, violently. "Go on! She fainted. Well, what then?"

"They had considerable difficulty in recovering her, I have been told. I was not there," says Lady Valworth, nervously. "She was naturally a good deal upset by the whole affair. I suppose you frightened her."

"You say I hurt her."

"You sent her with some force against the wall. You did not mean it"—hastily—"but when one is agitated as you were, one hardly knows what one is doing. You"—anxiously—"must not take that so much to heart; you did her no real harm. You must not be uneasy."

"Take it to heart? I wish I had *killed* her!" The words come with a hiss through his clinched teeth; his face is white and distorted with passion. "That she should live, and live with him, is the galling thought; that is more than I can bear. How her little white fingers fastened on his arm! Liar that she is! How she deceived and ruined me! Body and soul she has destroyed."

"Oh, not your soul, darling! There is time—repentance."

"There is very little time now—and I am unrepentant."

He throws up his head and points to the window. The lamps in the room are waning, and through the closely curtained window the first pale streaks of coming morn are stealing with a persistency that will not be denied. Day is breaking, and with it his mother's heart. The cruel light will tear him from her, will carry him—whither?

"You have not told me where you are going," she says, pressing her hand against her heart to still its throbbing.

"I can tell no one that."

"What! not your own mother? Granit, do not fear I will betray you; anything you say to me now will be sacred. Tell me where it is you mean to go."

"I cannot."

"But why—why?"

"For the simple reason that I don't know myself." There is a curious gleam in his eyes that disturbs her, and makes her forget the flippancy of his tone. "It is to a strange land I will wend my way before the day is very much older. A stranger in a strange land! My reception will be a cold one, or perchance a hot one."

He laughs wildly. His merriment is, however, short-

lived, breaking off almost as it began, and ending in a dismal silence.

"You are thinking of Africa," says his mother, trembling, she scarcely knows why. "If you still refuse to let me know exactly where you are going, at least promise you will write to me. Granit, my dear, *dear* son, promise me that."

"I will promise you anything you like, though I doubt if you would care to keep up the correspondence." There is something terrible in his manner, which has grown frivolous in a ghastly way, and his face is livid. "*She* will live and prosper," he says, inconsequently as it seems to Lady Valworth; "but she will have to—remember. I will compel her to do that! And remember you," laying his hand roughly upon his mother's shoulder, "remember *well* that my last words were that she was responsible for all!"

"I will not believe these are your last words. You will return to me when all this is blown over; you will return, if even for a month or so. Promise me that, too, Granit."

"From where I am going no man returns."

"That is not true. There is no place on earth from which you cannot come back to me, if you only will."

"No place on *earth!*" He repeats her words slowly. "My place on earth will know me no more." He seems to wander away from the actual meaning of her words to the mere sound of them. "I have no longer any place on earth," he says, dreamily.

"You have a place in my heart always," cries she, with a sudden burst of weeping. She throws her arms round him, and clings to him in an embrace that is full of despair. "Alas! my one child! my pretty baby! that it should come to this," she moans, bitterly.

"You will not forget my message to her?"

Though he is supporting her half-fainting form, he hardly heeds her; her words bear no meaning to him. His mind is ever with the girl who had unconsciously betrayed him, whom he had loved—whom he still loves, with a terrible intensity.

"I shall forget nothing. When do you start?"

"When you leave me."

"There will be no train, darling, until seven o'clock."

"I shall require no train."

"But how, then, will you go?"

Again he burst into that loud discordant laughter that chills the blood in her veins.

"Do not be uneasy about me. I have prepared for myself a mode of transit swifter than any train. Pouf! Steam will be slow to it."

"You do not trust me," she says, sorrowfully, still unsuspecting, still dead to the warning that his words, his face, his manner, should have given her.

"I trust you entirely. I trust you with my last message—to her! Now go."

"I shall see you again," entreats she, lingering.

"I hope not! I hope from *my soul* not!"

For the first time his composure seems to desert him. He grows ghastly pale, and a fit of shivering seizes upon him.

"You are ill—you are suffering!" cries his mother, quickly.

"No. It is nothing. Only go. I must be alone for a while, and my time now is short. Good-by."

Stooping, he presses his lips to her forehead.

"For the moment?" she answers, anxiously.

"Good-by."

There is no denial of her question in his manner, and she is fain to be content with it. She clings to him, and embraces him warmly; an embrace he returns in kind. She moves as if to leave him. Almost as she reaches the door, his voice stops her.

"One word," he says, huskily. "Do not—do not be unkind to her! When I am gone, do not show or feel resentment toward her!"

He makes her a sign with his hand to declare he has said all he had called her back to hear, and going out, she closes the door behind her.

The sound of her retreating footsteps has died away. He is alone! He stretches out his arms wearily, as one might who has just flung from him some cruel burden, and drawing back the curtains, opens wide the window and gazes out upon the growing day. Already the sun has mounted the heavens, and from the east, soft rosy bars of tremulous light are descending upon the distant hill-tops. From among the laurels comes the thrilling music of innumerable birds; from the wood the cooing of the gentle pigeons. A rose that has climbed up the wall, more ambitious that its fellows, thrusts its scented petals into his hand.

Mechanically he accepts the gift, and breaking the flower from its stem, inhales its perfume. It is wet with

dew, and sweet as only a morning rose can be, with all the cool moisture of the dead past night still on it, and buried in its heart. Boyle, still as if without thought, having trifled with the flower, carries it to a table near, and puts out his hand toward a vase filled with water. The action rouses him. He checks himself, and after a brief pause flings the flower upon the ground. He had been about to place it in the water with a view to its preservation, when that revulsion of feeling came over him. To save it from instant destruction—why? That he might see it upon the morrow? *The morrow?* Where will he be then?

He sets his heel upon the flower and crushes it out of all loveliness. Death is rushing toward him on swift black wings—shall that senseless flower be spared? It is a very poor, a very paltry bit of malice, yet it nerves him, and brings him again face to face with his indomitable resolve.

Crossing the room, he opens a case lying upon a bureau, and draws from it a revolver. He runs his hand lightly over it, and the cool touch of the steel seems to steady him. Having assured himself that it was loaded, he lays it down again and turns to a writing-table.

His hand is firm, the writing bold as ever. A few words, explaining where the famous sapphires (now dismantled and unset) may be found in his rooms in town, are addressed to his mother. Bold words, with no endearing commencement, no affectionate termination. To him the sapphires are of no further use. It is as well that Millicent should have them again.

He flings the pen aside, and, rising to his feet, paces hurriedly up and down the room. He can walk now. But like a flash it bursts upon him that soon movement will be impossible. There upon the carpet he will lie like a stick—a stone! The great grand fever of living is tearing through his veins. His pulses throb, his heart beats—there are years of life within the tall, slender, firmly built frame that looks its last through the open window. The early morning air, fresh and fragrant, rushes gayly in. Heavens! how fair the world is! Was it ever so fair as today?

He takes up the revolver again and lifts it to his mouth. There is a short hesitation. His mind travels backward. His brain reels. There!—*There!* she is before him again! A slight form, clothed all in palest blue. A face divine!

Her lovely arms! Her eyes—dark—liquid. See, now, they gleam for—Duran! *Curse him!* To him she holds out her hands. To him she gives herself. She turns——

A groan of agonized remembrance bursts from his lips. Then follows a sharp report! It rings through the house! He sways, and a corpse, disfigured in a horrible manner, falls heavily to the ground. All is over!

. . . . . .

Through the window the light breeze enters merrily, and floating downward, lifts the hair, that is still unwet, from the dead man's head, and softly, delicately, plays with it. There is only the breeze. All other motion is gone. So intense is the silence that reigns within the chamber that a tiny bird, emboldened by it, perches on the sill of the window, and breaks forth into a morning carol, loud and shrill. A *carol!* A requiem, rather!

And now the silence is broken. Through the passages beyond comes the sound of hurrying feet. There is one that runs before the others. Nearer, nearer they come, and still the bird carols, the wind plays—the dead man lies there, careless—unknowing.

A touch upon the handle of the door. The wind still revels in the lifeless tresses, but the bird has flown away. The door opens——

Upon the threshold stands—*his mother!*

THE END.

MOONSHINE AND MARGUERITES

AND OTHER TALES.

BY

THE DUCHESS,

AUTHOR OF "MOLLY BAWN," "PHYLLIS," "MRS. GEOFFREY," "AIRY FAIRY LILIAN," "PORTIA," ETC.,

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MOONSHINE AND MARGUERITE.

CHAPTER I.

"My love she's but a lassie yet."

"It's a tremendously good thing for her," says Mr. Wilding. "She's got the match of the season. There she is, standing over there. Do you see? Little girl in white, with daisies all over her."

"Eh? Oh, yes," says Sir George, looking in quite the contrary direction at an overblown young thing of thirty or thereabouts,—not to be uncharitable.

"Not there, my dear fellow. *There!*"

"Eh? Oh, yes, of course," says Sir George, in exactly the same tone. "Why, she's a child!"

"Barely seventeen. But her people put her up first chance on account of her remarkably fine eyes and the six sisters yet to come. Ponsonby's got a lot of money, and *looks* as if he adores her."

"He *does*," says Sir George, staring at the young beauty's present partner,—a stalwart Mephistopheles,

who is decidedly *épris* with her; "but she don't *look* as if she adored *him*,—eh?"

"*That* isn't her *fiancé*. He is lounging against the door-way on your right, talking to that tall dark girl in yellow, Miss Nugent."

"Why on earth can't he talk to his *own* girl?" says Sir George, testily, who is growing angry at his many mistakes.

Mr. Wilding laughs. "Miss Nugent was very near being that," he says. "She is his cousin, an heiress in her own right, and, I dare say, the girl he *would* have married, but for the *beaux yeux* of that little baby over there. The Ponsonbys had it all arranged. It's just another case of 'man proposes,' you know."

"You haven't told me the baby's name," says Sir George, who has never taken his eyes off her since first they fell on her.

"Disney,—Alys Disney."

"Her costume suits her. Is she a Marguerite?"

"Not Goethe's Marguerite," says Wilding, coldly, and with a half frown.

"I meant nothing half so indelicate, believe me," says Sir George, with an amused smile. "You need not ruffle your feathers like that. I meant only one of those charming, innocent field-flowers, one sees sometimes in—er—Birket Foster's pictures, and that.

I'm told they grow in meadows; but I never saw a meadow: beastly bumpkins always cut 'em down before one can get to the country. There's something —er—very special about her mouth, isn't there—eh?"

"I really don't know," says Mr. Wilding. "Come into the supper-room and have something. I feel awfully used up."

Taking forcible possession of the little baronet, he pilots him successfully through massive dowagers and languishing wall-flowers to the room beyond without making a mistake. Mr. Wilding is a young man of much merit, whose manner ladies call "invaluable" and girls "charming." By these last he is regarded as a general favorite—principally, perhaps, because though now twenty-nine, he has never yet selected from among them a *particular* favorite. He is still all their own, and belongs to everybody, because he belongs to nobody.

By the time he and his companion have gained the happy land of chicken and champagne, it occurs to Sir George Grande that he had not wanted to come.

"I wish you hadn't shown such senseless haste," he says. "I hadn't half done looking at that little girl in the daisies. She's pretty."

"Don't give yourself airs," says Wilding. "Pretty! She's *the* new Beauty! with a great big B. Don't make a mistake about it. You are to rave whenever you hear her name mentioned, or they will argue you unknown."

"I wish they would," says Sir George, with a faint grimace. "I've put in my year abroad like a good little boy; but the welcome accorded me by the duchess on my return could hardly be called scorching."

"One's own people are always the hardest on one's little peccadilloes," says Mr. Wilding, staring at his glass.

"I call it real nasty of her, anyway," says Sir George, "considering it was to please her I cleared out and lost my season last year."

"Well, you know, you *had* been going it a bit," says Wilding apologetically. "Two fortunes, by Jove! before you were twenty-six; and—and that other little affair. But I think, now your banishment is at an end, open censure should be at an end too. I gave your sister credit for better feeling."

"She's one of the goody-goodies. Never expect anything from them but a scandal in the long run. And when they do give place to the devil, it is with a vengeance. Charity, because it is the greatest, is the rarest of all virtues, and the duchess lacks it. How-

ever, I am independent of her and all since I came in for the Trevor estates. I wonder how long this third fortune will last me? eh, Wilding? Never mind; let's talk about that pretty child up-stairs. Know her?"

"She is my cousin," says Wilding.

"Then she is 'a dangerous thing,' as some old rhyme says,—and justly so in this case, I should say; though I believe *you* are fire-proof. Take me back to the ball-room and introduce me to her."

"You have proved yourself anything but fire-proof, and she is a forbidden sweet," says Wilding. "Better keep your fingers out of the blaze."

"But, alas! she is another's, and she never can be mine! that is what you mean,—eh?" says Sir George, laughing with exceeding light-heartedness. "Well, I'll risk even that; and if I fall beneath her chariot-wheels, my blood be on my own head."

Still Mr. Wilding palpably hesitates.

"Not moral enough for sweet seventeen—is *that* it?" says his friend, with a very faint sneer. "Don't try to disguise the fact, old man: one can read it on your ingenuous countenance. You will never reach the woolsack, Wilding, if you give way to your emotions like this."

"You go something beyond the mark," say Wilding reflectively.

"Do I? I am willing—nay, *anxious*—to believe you. Make me known to your cousin, then. I swear"—half mockingly—"I will be as good as gold in her sainted presence, and never once cease to remember that she has been labelled as 'a *good* man's bride.'"

"Come, then. A promise is a promise," says Wilding.

And presently they find themselves face to face with Miss Disney and her intended, in a small conservatory, and Sir George has the pleasure of knowing that Miss Disney is now in full possession of the fact that his name is Grande.

He has taken her card, and now says, "May I?" standing before her with pencil uplifted, waiting her permission to engrave his name thereon.

"With pleasure," says Miss Disney, courteously but indifferently. With the young, however, it is as natural to smile as to breathe: so she smiles at him.

Having made his own of this careless concession on her part, Sir George lets his eyes wander back again to her programme. "It sounds incredible," he says at length, "but it seems as if you are disengaged for *this* dance. I can see no name before it. If so, may I have it?"

"*Am* I disengaged?—then yes," returns she thoughtlessly.

"You are engaged to *me* for the next," interferes Ponsonby at this moment, in a dull but hurried tone which he strives hard to relieve from a suspicion of offense.

"Yes? Is it? But of *course*. I quite forgot. The next dance, then, Sir George, for which I am free, which will be the fourteenth,—if we stay so long. You see," bending slightly toward him with a childish, restless movement, "I *never* put down Mr. Ponsonby's name."

"I quite understand," says Sir George, with a gesture of the hand and a smile. And then the interview is over, and Miss Disney is in her lover's arms, waltzing languidly to the strains of the band sent down to the castle from town.

He cuts the dance somewhat short, and draws her, not unwillingly, to the open window of a room that, leading to the balcony, is suggestive of an easy descent by stone steps to the *pleasuance* beneath.

Into the night and into the slumberous garden he leads her, where mignonette and late sweet roses give forth unconscious perfume to the drowsy air.

A pale young moon is hanging in the heavens above, her beams falling tenderly upon the sleeping

earth. Ever and anon a fleecy cloud glides over her, threatening to blot her from her place; but again, ere doubt has time for growth, it hurries on, and,

> Melting like a wreath of snow, it hangs,
> In folds of wavy silver round, and clothes
> The orb with richer beauties than her own—
> Then, passing, leaves her in her light serene.

"Do you feel the softness of the air?" says the girl, turning to him with a touch of impulsive gladness in her tone. "I like a garden at midnight, and I like the country better than the town. The season wearied me. It was always the same. Monotony, some say, belongs altogether to fields, and woods, and streams; but it is not really so. Here everything speaks to me; it is only those others who cannot understand—" Here she checks herself, as though some sudden recollection returns to her. "Are you laughing at me?" she says. "I am, I *know*, in one of the moods auntie calls funny. Well, even if you do smile at my folly, I shan't mind *you*. Look at these garden-marguerites: are they not lovely in the moonlight? Wait. Let me try your fortune with one." She plucks it petal by petal, murmuring, as she does so, the old refrain, "He loves me—a little—indifferently—passionately—not at all." As the last leaf comes,

it brings her "indifferently." "Oh, you bad boy," she says; "and after all your protestations!"

"It is a lying prophet," says Ponsonby, who is a grave young young man of twenty-seven, with very tall loving gray eyes, sensitive lips, and an earnest expression. He looks decidedly older than he is, while she, who is only seventeen, looks decidedly younger.

"Well, it is only natural you should make out a good story for yourself," she says, with a mischievous glance. "Now to see how *she* regards *you*." She picks another marguerite from the group near her as she speaks, and as she flings its mutilated remains away, says gayly, "She loves you."

"There! that is more than you deserve; you have got the best assurance of all, to *my* thinking. 'Passionately' is such rubbish. Don't you think so?"

"I am not sure," says Mr. Ponsonby, with his eyes on hers.

"No? Well I hope you don't love *me* passionately, because I should hate it. There is such a pretense about it. It is mere sound. One can't pass perfection, you know. I know *I* couldn't love any one to distraction, as they call it, to save my life. Oh, *listen* to that nightingale!" She turns from him and gazes with eager eyes in the direction whence comes that

heavenly music, while her lover gazes at her with eyes into which a certain sadness has fallen.

There she stands, a flower among her fellows, radiant, beautiful, in the clear light of the pure moon,—such a child!—with her little curly head and smiling lips and large dewy eyes. Already where are her thoughts? flying—flying, ever,—now to sweet Philomel, now perchance to—

She has given herself to him, but is she *really* his? The body minus the soul is but a sorry bargain, and whether he has ever honestly touched her heart has been a question with the young man ever since that first day when she promised to be his.

"Your cousin looks as if *she* could," she says, turning, not so much suddenly as with a certain sense of vitality toward him.

"Could what?"—with a start.

"Love passionately. Katherine Nugent, I mean."

"Oh! Do you think she could?" His manner is still a little vague.

"Yes. Do you know, Frank," coming a little nearer to him, "sometimes I have thought she is in love with *you?*"

"Nonsense, darling!"

"I *have* thought it. *Is* it nonsense?"

"Utter. If you were right, you must confess she

has a singular way of showing her attachment. Only yesterday,"—with a light laugh,—"something cutting in her manner made me tell myself I was an object of positive aversion to her."

"Still, I *thought* it," says Alys, with all a child's wilful persistence. "But of course I was wrong." Then, "*Why* didn't *you* fall in love with *her?*"

"Because you came to me."

"Was that your only reason? See, now, what mischief I have done. She would have suited you better than I shall."

"That is the one point on which I will not give in to you."

"She is clever, and handsome, and—"

"Dear heart, you are all that, and a thousand other things besides."

"A thousand bad things, I dare say; whereas she—she seems to lack nothing."

"Beyond the crowning imperfection that she is not—*you!*"

"And yet—" She pauses, and casts at him a glance swift but anxious from under her long lashes. "Sometimes I vex you, don't I?" she says, dropping her lids again.

"No—" he is beginning, but she stops him with a merry little gesture.

"Let us have the whole truth, and nothing but it,"

she says, with a charming smile. "You were angry with me only twenty minutes ago."

"When, my dearest?"

"When I forgot my dance—*this* dance—with you; and again when I promised Sir George Grande one later on. Deny it if you dare."

"How did you know that?"

"Your eyes told me. Ah!"—laughing softly,—"I can see things sometimes."

"You are a little witch. I confess all. Your forgetting grieved me sorely; but, besides that, I didn't like you to dance with Sir George."

"But why?"

"For many reasons—" He hesitates. Why raise unlovely thoughts in the mind of this tender child?

"He looks as if he could be amusing," says she carelessly; "and he is staying here with us, you know. He came this morning, and will be here all the week. And auntie says Lady Fanny Davenport is very anxious to marry him."

"Is she? Well, never mind. Let us forget him. *You* are going to marry me, are you not? And soon, darling?"

"I think so," says Miss Disney, with the utmost serenity. "Mamma says Maudie can't come out until I am got out of the way: so it is unfair to her to delay

too long. And it is all the same to you, I suppose, isn't it?"—anxiously.

The humor of this naïve remark might have struck the young man but for something else that strikes him still more keenly, and that has *no* humor in it: a shade saddens his face.

"Is it to please Maudie or me you give so ready a consent?" he says, a tinge of bitterness in his tone. It may be that the girl marks it and resents it. At least she turns from him with a gesture that is petulant.

"Perhaps to please myself more than either," she says; and, though the words might be made to convey a compliment, the delivery of them spoils the effect.

"You love me?" asks Ponsonby, suddenly turning to her and taking her hand.

"Still a sceptic? Has not this mystic flower assured you of my truth?"—nodding her small head at the marguerites hard by. "*I* should be the one to doubt, considering the dreadful tale it told me!"

"If ever," says Ponsonby, drawing her close to him, "you should feel that the—the affection you now bear me is less than you imagined it, and that you could"—growing very pale—"give your heart more entirely to another, promise me you will let me know of it in some way, by some word, or sign, or token."

"I couldn't promise to be as rude as that," returns she mischievously.

"Be serious for once," entreats he. Something in his tone touches her. The smile fades from her lips, leaving only a certain sweet reflection of it behind. Coming closer to him, she lifts one bare round arm and with very tender little fingers smooths back the hair from his brow.

"There is no need for me to make such a promise," she says, "because I shall never have to tell you *that*."

"Nevertheless, promise!"

"'A wilful man must have his way.' You have my promise, then; but not in words shall I redeem it. When I have learned to hate you, I will send you one of *these*"—again pulling a marguerite from the tall bunch growing near—"with 'not at all' as its last petal. Poor flower!" compassionately apostrophizing it, "what a sad mission I should send it on! Do you know, I never invoked my fortune with one of these until I tried it to-night with you?"

"I am glad of that; and"—eagerly—"you never will again, will you?"

"Why, how *can* I now?" says Miss Disney, with uplifted brows. "My fortune is told: *you* are it. How funny that sounds! it puts you in the neuter gender at once!"

"I shan't see you again for a week," says Ponsonby suddenly. "I go to town by the early train. You will not forget me during my absence?"

"No. Take this with *you*, to remind you of *me*, every moment, until we meet again,"—she places the marguerite in his coat as she speaks,—"and, when you look at it, remember the message it brought you," she says coquettishly.

"For that reason its whole tribe shall be sacred to me for evermore," says Ponsonby, with a smile that lights his face into actual beauty.

CHAPTER II.

"Whose tongue outvenoms all the worms of Nile."

It is mid-day, and all the world is mad and merry with excess of sunshine and the myriad harmonies of nature's gigantic choir. Even through the carefully-closed curtains of Indian muslin that shade the morning room at Moorlands, great Sol is penetrating, rendering the air hot and languorous.

"I have come to a conclusion," says Miss Disney, suddenly, sinking back in her huge arm-chair, that might easily entomb her, and flinging her arms with lazy grace above her head.

"Yes?" The answer, which is half a question, comes in low, soft accents across the misty, hazy heat that fills the room, yet with a suspicion of veiled insolence about it. It comes from a beautiful mouth, however, and Katherine Nugent, as she utters the unpleasing monosyllable, turns calm, dark eyes upon her cousin's *fiancée*.

The *fiancée* moves restlessly, and a faint color creeps into her *mignonne* face.

"I suppose," the says, with a rather shy laugh, "that a conclusion coming from me (involving, as it must, some thought) may be regarded in the light of an eighth wonder. Is that what your tone meant?"

"And the conclusion?" asks Katherine tranquilly, and with all the air of one who has heard nothing of the foregoing protest.

"Is—that to-night will never come. Was there ever such a long, long day?"

"You miss Frank,"—shortly.

"No: do I? Perhaps so. I am not sure. I was not thinking of him."

"Yet he is a man to make himself remembered even when out of sight."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"Katherine," says the younger girl, suddenly, "how

often you get me to speak of Frank! Sometimes I have thought—but of course it was only fancy. You never *did* care for him in *that way*, did you?"

"The way *you* care for him? Never."

"I am so glad I asked you, now. If you had given me a different answer it would have made me very unhappy."

"That is a very kindly speech. But you need suffer no generous pangs of regret for me. Frank is as little to me as I am—to him." She shades her eyes with her hand for a moment, perhaps to conceal a smile, for presently she breaks into a low laugh suggestive of amusement to her listener. "What put the silly thought into your head?" she asks.

"I hardly know."

"Somebody must have done it." Again there is the carelessly-veiled insolence of tone, the contemptuous disbelief in her companion's sagacity or penetration.

"Somebody, I dare say," says the girl musingly. "Perhaps—" She pauses.

"Was it *he?*" The words come from her with exceeding sharpness, as though forced to her lips by some terrible thought that had just pierced her brain and brought with it an agony too keen to be silently endured.

"Oh, no!"

"You are *sure?*"—still fiercely, with pale lips, and dark eyes alight with passionate fear.

"You will see how sure, when I tell you that Frank believes you positively dislike him. He told me so last night. Now,"—laughing,—"I think he was right. How angry your eyes have grown at the bare mention of his name!"

"Ah!" says Miss Nugent. It is a sigh of relief that escapes her. She leans back in her chair, and a great wave of color sweeps over her white face. She unfurls her huge black fan with a little crashing noise.

"You haven't told me how you enjoyed last night," she says quickly, as a means of covering her confusion.

"*So* much!" says the young girl, smiling, and throwing some animation into her air.

"I saw you dancing rather frequently with Sir George Grande toward the close of the evening."

"Twice I danced with him, I think. Do you know, I quite like him, though Frank doesn't?"

"Men like Frank, who have been through a good deal, are always inclined to be jealous. Experience has taught them how transient a love affair *may* be."

"You mean"—emotionally—"that Frank has loved so often that—"

"I mean nothing. There is really no occasion for

any excitement. But of course you will understand that a man cannot grow to Frank's age without having played with fire. There is nothing to render you uneasy in anything I have said."

"I am not uneasy,"—flushing warmly.

"No? But of course not. There is really nothing in it."

"I know that," says the girl, loyally, yet even as she says it her heart grows heavier within her. There *is* really nothing in it; but *why* had he *told* her she was his first and only love? Perhaps men always said that to the object of their latest fancy.

"Once last night, when you were dancing with Frank," she says, turning to Miss Nugent, and recovering her self-possession by an effort, "I looked at you, and both you and he were looking at me. Was he talking of me then?"

"Does he ever talk of anything else? A man *freshly* in love is the most selfish thing on earth. Later on they grow more considerate, and can afford to forget the beloved angel now and then."

"Can they?"—wistfully. Will Frank indeed learn to forget her at times?

"Yes. What were we saying just then? You asked me if he was talking of you? Yes, entirely. He was telling me of something you had said—I forget what

now—and he was laughing. He called you 'such a child,' I remember. It was some silly little trifle, amusing because of its crudity. He is very devoted to you."

Again the sting is in her tone. It makes the girl's lips quiver, and brings the light of rebellion to her beautiful eyes.

"At seventeen one is not a child. You make me think he spoke of me as a doll, a baby, a mere plaything."

"Oh, *no!* Merely as a *very* young girl. You *are* young to *him*, you know: he is quite ten years your senior."

"The advantage there is on my side, surely,"—haughtily. "If *I* don't mind it, he need not."

"Quite so. I think every woman should be ten years or so younger than her husband," says Katherine, who is just six months younger than Ponsonby. "And as for him, I *know* he prefers extreme youth. It is easier to mould and form."

She closes her fan with another click, drops it languidly into her lap, and smiles faintly.

"'To mould'!" The girl's tone has grown strangely cold and calm. "I am to be educated to his will, you mean?"

"Well, that was what he said—'

"*Said?*"

"My dear child, I can't remember the exact words, but he told me last night he had gained a treasure—one of those rare beings to whom the world is unknown. He dreaded no rival, he said, because—I really forget the 'because,' but it was something to the effect that, as you had not dreamed of lovers until he came on the scene, they were not necessary to you, and all that. I told him not to be too certain,"—laughing,—"but he quite scoffed at the thought that you could prefer any one to his royal highness. After all, I doubt if it is a wise thing to let a man feel *too* sure of one."

"Is *that* how he talks of me to you?" says Alys, with a glance of cold disdain from her heavily-fringed eyes. To really know any one is difficult, and to view one's dearest friend in a different light is to regard him as a stranger. "We have been prosing a good deal, have we not? I am afraid I have made the day even duller for you than it really is."

"Perhaps it is my fault," says Miss Nugent, politely.

"Impossible! You have tried your best to enliven me, and if you have failed it is *my* fault. It is the heat, I suppose. Who could have believed in so hot a sun in September?"

Miss Nugent, as though scenting sarcasm in this speech, glances at her sharply; but the girl has risen and has averted her face, and, after a languid attempt at further conversation, quits the room.

When the men come in from shooting, however, she reappears in a charming pale-pink tea-gown, and as Sir George flings himself upon the lounge close beside her, she turns to him with new graciousness, and lets her lovely eyes smile into his, and draws away her skirts that he may nestle even nearer to her.

"She is rehearsing her new *rôle*," says Katherine Nugent, taking in all this from afar, with a curl of her lips, and a shrug of her handsome shoulders, and a most unlovely smile of devilish gratification.

CHAPTER III.

"Love! thou art cruel!"

At the end of the third day Sir George Grande is as much in love with Miss Disney as his nature will permit. At the end of the week, and when the night is come that is to see the return of Mr. Ponsonby, he has overstepped that limit, and is making an open ass of himself about the youthful beauty—*not* with-

out encouragement! For Mademoiselle l'Ingénue during these seven days has developed into a subdued but dangerous coquette.

Ponsonby, who has arrived barely in time to change his clothes for dinner (but who has been nevertheless bitterly disappointed that no gracious childish form has met him on his arrival to bid him welcome), coming into the drawing-room twenty-five minutes past seven, is somewhat taken aback by the tableau that there presents itself to him.

Upon a couch, half shrouded by the lace curtains of the window near it from public view, sits his promised wife, looking lovely as a dream, in Indian muslin and filmy laces, Sir George Grande beside her. The latter is stooping forward, gazing intently into her eyes. Upon every line of his good-looking face hopeless infatuation is written.

Ponsonby, advancing slowly as one walking in his sleep, knocks inadvertently against a spider-legged chair and sends it to the ground with some noise.

Miss Disney starts, looks round, and, seeing who it it who is coming towards them, colors deeply. It is only a momentary emotion, however, and, conquering it, she rises swiftly, but with inherent grace, from her seat, and goes to meet him. Her self-possession is complete.

"You have come?" she says, with a smile most lovely, but studiously indifferent.

"Yes." If his life depended upon it, Ponsonby could say no more. He is feeling stunned, bewildered, lost! Here is this girl, whom he had left believing her his own, standing before him now in all her radiant beauty, clothed in careless smiles, and with a touch of something new (is it triumph?) upon her parted lips. He turns away, sick at heart.

Finding her alone later on in the evening, he says quietly, "You and Sir George seem to be quite good friends."

"I like him very much," she says gently enough, but with a grain of defiance in her tone which he is not slow to mark.

"*That* I can see for myself," he says, with a rather forced smile. "What an atom out of eternity is a bare week! and yet—"

"You found it short, then?"—glancing at him with a half frown.

"Never mind me," he says impatiently. "What of *you?*"

"Why should *I* submit to an examination from which *you* shrink?" retorts she with some *hauteur*, throwing up her dainty head, and making a smile

from Lady Newport, who is sitting directly opposite, an excuse for leaving him.

"What a heavenly night!" says Miss Nugent suddenly, as, drawing back the curtains, she lets a rush of glorious moonlight flood the room. "And the air,—how soft and warm! Why not come into the gardens and enjoy it, as we have done every night for the past week? You and Sir George, Alys, used to be the first to propose it. Now"—smiling—"you basely throw the responsibility upon my shoulders."

"Far be it from us," says Sir George lightly. "Class us not among the backsliders. There is something about Miss Disney that always suggests to me a kinship with Diana: not for one moment, therefore, would she, I feel convinced, dream of casting a slight upon her illustrious relative. You will come and pay your accustomed court to her, will you not, Miss Disney?"

For a moment she hesitates; almost a refusal is on her lips, when her eyes chance to fall on Ponsonby's. In his there is open though unconscious rebuke, and it turns the scale in Sir George's favor.

"Come," she says, holding out her hand to him with a sweet smile prettily tinged with coquetry, and together they step lightly from the drawing-room to the balcony, and from thence to the gardens—lit by

the "wandering moon" to a transparent brilliancy—that lie beneath, wrapt in sleep. The others follow.

Ponsonby, as though compelled thereto by some iron demon, moves in their train, speaking such idle trash as society demands, even from the heavy-hearted, to Katherine Nugent. But his whole soul is centred on the form of the little wilful girl flitting before him, now nearer, now a long way off, now fading away altogether in the embrace of some amorous shadow, only to reappear again in a patch of purest moonlight.

At last he really loses sight of her. Two or three people coming up to Katherine engross her in some merry argument and will not let her go. Glad at heart at this chance of being once more alone, Ponsonby moves away from the group, stepping out from it silently.

Seeing this, Katherine says gently but hastily, "Go and see the eastern end of the gardens, Frank: it will reward you; it is lovely in this light. You know it?—that little bit apart, where the old statue of Apollo stands half shrouded in ivy?"

Does he know it? How well he remembers how he stood there with *her* a week ago and had a sweet but lying tale told him by a marguerite! No, he will *not* go there again! And yet some fascination draws him

through the scented dews and glittering beams to the spot where, seven days ago, he had at least been happy in the thought that he was without a rival; and now—

Now! He had reached Apollo's shrine with downcast eyes; but the sound of voices near compels him to lift his head. As he does so, he starts, and turns deadly pale. There, in her clinging white gown, scarcely less fair than the moonbeams that riot round her, stands the girl he loves, a freshly-plucked marguerite in her hand, and beside her Sir George Grande.

Is it a ray from her high-born kinswoman, or what is it, that makes her appear so pale? She is plucking the flower petal by petal, and once again the old-world refrain comes to Ponsonby across the fragrant sward, borne upon the wings of the night-wind, "She loves you a little,—indifferently,—passionately—"

"Ah! cruel flower! why will it not stop there?" says Sir George, sentimentally.

At this moment the hand that holds the flower droops, and the girl, raising her head, looks calmly and defiantly into Ponsonby's eyes. There is no surprise in her glance, no shrinking: it is as if she had known he was there even before she looked.

Thus for an indefinable period they gaze at each

other, and then he lowers his eyes, and, turning, walks slowly away.

"That was Ponsonby," says Sir George, screwing his glass into his best eye the better to discern the retreating figure.

"I know it."

"Ah! you saw him before I did?"

"I saw him as he came."

"Yes?"—airily,—"you would, you know: there's such a lot of him. Modern Hercules, and all that sort of thing. Good fellow, Ponsonby, though. Capital fellow, don't you think—eh? but a trifle dreary. Looks as if he has the toothache just now, don't he?"

"No, he '*don't*'!" says Miss Disney, answering him in his own sweet English, but with a sudden and unexpected change of tone—from lively to severe.

"Very good, then: he *don't*," replies Sir George, totally unabashed. "Let's forget him. I've set my heart on hearing my fortune told me to-night by you, and beneath these mystic moonbeams, and as yet you have only got half-way. Try again."

"No—*never* again!" cries she passionately, crushing the poor flower in her slender grasp and flinging it far from her. There is such startling vehemence in both her tone and gesture that Sir George loses his glass

and his self-possession simultaneously. Before he can recover either, she has run away from him, and is lost among the shadows that lie lurking in the secret places of the laurels.

"By Jove! what a small tornado!" says the baronet, staring after her with uplifted brows. "A good deal of temper, no doubt, but all round—charming!"

Panting, hopelessly out of breath, Miss Disney gains her chamber and locks her door. Whilst running in, she has made up her mind she will not appear below again to-night. She is tired—yes, yes; she will go to bed. With hurried fingers (as though action is necessary to her in her frame of mind) she undresses herself, says her prayers, looks into her Bible (a very little look to-night, I am afraid), and finally, finding herself standing in her dainty night-gown, goes up to a tall cheval-glass in the corner of the room and gazes at her own lovely image therein.

Her cheeks are still flushed by her run; her lips are red and parted, her soft eyes full of a defiance that is most foreign to them.

"At last I have shown him I am not a mere baby, to be moulded as he wills, and that a rival is not an actual impossibility," says this silly child to herself; all the while her heart is breaking with suppressed pain, and a wild desire to run to "him" and throw

herself into his arms and confess to him how eagerly she longs to be friends with him again.

Yet bravely she keeps back the emotion that threatens to overpower her, and, still encouraging vengeful thoughts, slips into her lavender-scented sheets—a thing as white as they.

CHAPTER IV.

"Treason doth never prosper."

But calm sleep, and morning, bring a more heavenly frame of mind. The extreme nervousness she feels at the thought of being obliged to meet him soon again face to face, and the painful distant greeting accorded to her by him when they do meet at breakfast-time, both combined, reduce Miss Disney to a state bordering on tears and penitence.

Yet luncheon and dinner hours arrive without action of any sort having been taken; and it is only when the first *entrée* has gone round (which, though excellent, has been discovered by her to be utterly tasteless), that a way of escape occurs to her.

To tell him in simple English that she is sorry has long been found to be out of the question; but there is another very graceful little plan that suggests itself

to her, and is carried *nem. con.*, and passes from a thought into a resolution.

That little episode last night he will surely forgive her. He must have *felt* she only did it through childish spleen. She will send him a carefully selected marguerite that will finish with "she loves you."

Going to her room directly she gets out of the dining-room, she selects from among a large bunch of flowers upon her table a giant daisy, and counts it eagerly. Plucking off those that mar her design, she leaves it with the desired reading for the last petal, and then goes slowly down-stairs again. But at the last step her courage fails her. He has looked so cold, so unloving, all day, that she dares not give it to him herself. Even as she hesitates with this new trouble at her heart, Katherine Nugent crosses the hall below her.

In a flash it occurs to her that *here* is a way out of her difficulty. "Katherine!" she calls softly. "Katherine!"

"Well?" says Miss Nugent, pausing.

"I want"—hurriedly—"to *tell* you something—to *ask* you to do me a great favor. You are *his* cousin and *my* friend, are you not? And—and I *must* speak to somebody; and auntie is so impossible."

"Well?" says Miss Nugent again

"Will you listen to me for a little while?"

"Certainly." The word is uttered with studious politeness. "What is it?"

What it is—the primary cause of all the disturbance, the enlargement of the quarrel, and the means to be now employed with a view to restoring the old harmony existing between them—is soon laid bare to Miss Nugent.

"And now I want Frank to know it was all a mistake, and that I still love him dearly—*dearly*. You know I do."

"I know nothing," says Miss Nugent stonily. "Well, go on."

"He once called this flower *sacred* to *us*,—for—for a certain reason," goes on Alys tremulously, her eyes bent sadly upon the marguerite in her hand. "And I thought if I sent him one with 'she loves you' coming on the last petal it would tell him everything. Would it not?"—wistfully.

"You know him so much better than I do that you can answer that question more satisfactorily for yourself. He is in the billiard-room. Are you going there now to give it to him?"

"I—I *can't*," says the girl, with a sudden accession of shyness, coloring violently. "Katherine,"—desperately,—"will *you* give it to him for me?"

"Me! You ask *me!*" says Katherine, growing deadly pale and recoiling from her.

"If you will, dearest," says the girl timidly.

"Ask *any* one but me," says Miss Nugent in a low but vehement tone, throwing out her hands with a passionate gesture. Then, the necessity for composure recurring to her, she makes a supreme effort, and in some measure regains calmness. "Take it yourself," she says slowly; but her tone is harsh and strained. As yet she cannot altogether command herself.

"I—I should be ashamed to go to him now," says the young girl, with a blush and an abashed laugh. "Katherine, *do* help me. He is in the billiard-room: take him this flower, and tell him I shall be in the library in five minutes. I am going there now."

"You persist in asking me to do this?" says Miss Nugent in a strange tone.

"I don't *insist*,"—gently,—"I only entreat you. There, go, like a dear girl; and—and be sure you take the flower with great care, as the loss of a petal would be fatal. You think me foolish, don't you?" she says, blushing again as she misconstrues the fixed expression on her companion's features.

"I think you are mad," says Katherine slowly. "Give me the flower, then. I will take it—if I can."

The last words, uttered in a falling tone, are unheard by Alys as she moves away to the library, there to wait with beating heart the coming and the pardon of her lover.

Left alone in the large hall, Katherine stands motionless, staring vacantly at the pale marguerite. There appears to be in it some horrible fascination for her. Her eyes are riveted upon it; her lips twitch; slowly (as though deterred by some hidden power) her other hand creeps toward it.

Almost as she touches it she pauses, and a shudder passes over her. With a heavy sigh that is almost a sob, she resolutely throws up her head, thus withdrawing her eyes from the flower, and at the same time places the hand that holds it behind her back, as though to remove it from her gaze.

A struggle short but sharp goes on within her. So powerful is it that her whole frame trembles beneath it. Then a face, childish, trusting, pleading, rises before her, and she moves with hurried footsteps in the direction of the billiard-room, still with the flower hidden from her view. But, almost as she turns the handle of the door, a voice from within, reaching her, kills the good so lately born. It brings before her another face—the face of the man she loves passionately though hopelessly—and, with a groan, she

falls back from the door, and, her nerves ceasing to be under her control, the arm so persistently heretofore kept behind her falls again into its usual position, so bringing her eyes once more on the fatal flower.

Is *she* to be the one to give this baby to his arms? —she, whose vaguest thought of him contains more passion than the warmest this petulant child has ever known? Again the half-shy, half-tender, girlish face comes before her; but this time she shakes the apparition from her with a frown. Pshaw! she would forget in a month this mawkish love of hers, and would be ready to love again in her poor fashion. And yet —there was something in those large blue eyes that—

She hesitates for one heaven-born moment, and then is lost.

Deliberately plucking one white petal from the marguerite, she opens the door of the billiard-room, and, with a smile and a calm word or two to some man who addresses her, moves with languid grace to where Ponsonby is standing somewhat apart from the others.

"Do you remember that book of James's we were discussing last night?" she says. "I can't think where I put it. Have you any idea?"

"I think you took it up-stairs with you."

"Oh, did I? I dare say. It is just the most possible places one never searches. Thank you. The fact of not being able to get it has made me long for it with the greater intensity for the last hour." She turns, as if to go away, then turns back again, as though in sudden remembrance of some trivial thing. "I had nearly forgotten," she says carelessly, "but your little *fiancée* asked me to give you this as I met her on my way here just now." She holds out to him, as she says this, the frail blossom in her hand, now drooping as though sad at heart because of the treachery of which it is the unwilling agent.

"From Alys?" says Ponsonby, a flush born of emotion darkening his face in spite of his desperate resolve to show none.

"Yes. She desired me also to tell you she would be in the library any time from this. A lover's tryst," —with a light laugh.—"To take my revenge *now*, Captain Sartoris? Well, I don't mind. Sir George to play with me against you and Lady Newport? Charming! Consider yourself beaten before you begin. I feel that victory rests with me to-night."

There is an exultant ring in her voice as she takes up her cue with a hand steady as marble, and as cold. It is the hand that a moment since held the mutilated marguerite.

The flush has died from Ponsonby's face, leaving only a deathly pallor in its place, and a smile replete with scorn for his own weakness. In eager, hopeful anticipation he had plucked the petals one by one from the flower sent by the love he now deems false, only to find the bitter assurance that she loves him "not at all" at its end.

How had it ever come to pass that he had given the entire happiness of his life into the keeping of this girl, who as the hour changed went with it and in a few short days had discovered a new lover? That she should have chosen a marguerite, the flower he had consecrated as sacred to her and him, as a means of conveying to him her altered sentiments, has hurt him in a terribly cruel manner. There is a lack of refinement in it that strikes a chill to his heart.

Still holding the flower in his hand, he crosses the billiard-room to the door, as blind to Katherine Nugent's keen glance as he is deaf to Lady Newport's honeyed speech, and goes straight to the library, where, by her own word, "*she*" is awaiting him to have her liberty restored to her. Surely it is not *his* part to delay the restoration.

Entering the library, he walks like one in a dream to the upper end of it, where, near the fireplace, Miss

Disney is standing with a beating heart and all her soul in her eyes.

But her eyes grow dim and her heart dies within her as she marks the expression of his face, and as he draws even nearer she palpably shrinks from him. To him this shrinking is a fresh proof of her inconstancy. "There is still some grace left in her, some pity for the forlorn wretch she has betrayed," he tells himself grimly, mistaking her nervousness for remorse.

"I have come to you at your own request," he says sternly. "Though I think this appointment—*made by you*—is a mistake. It is useless to talk of even a *friendly* feeling between us again, after all that has come and gone. There is nothing I so keenly desire as a formal separation between us."

Stunned, bewildered, she gazes at him in a speechless astonishment too fresh as yet for grief.

"I have come to set you finally free," he goes on. "I say nothing. I do not accuse you; and it is too late, we *both* know, for hope or expostulation of any kind. It is impossible to misunderstand *that*, at least. I have now to return you *this*,"—laying the innocent instrument of their undoing upon the table near her, —"and *this*." By its side he lays a faded bit of nature's handiwork that a week ago was the marguerite's

gay sister, plucked among the moonbeams and given him by the girl standing before him, pale and mute, and, in his eyes, most false.

A terrible sense of utter desolation falls upon him as he turns away undelayed by any word from her. Even at the door, though inwardly cursing his own weakness for so doing, he pauses, as though in a wild hope that she yet may call to him to come back to her; but no sound breaks upon the heavy stillness that seems to have fallen on the room, and, opening the door, he goes out quickly, closing it firmly behind him.

The click of the lock rouses Miss Disney from the spell that has taken her into full possession. With a little gasping cry, she sinks into a chair and covers her face with her hands. What does it all mean? What has happened?

Slowly—slowly—the thought dawns upon her that he has *rejected* her—has spurned her overture and treated her poor attempt at reconciliation with ignominy. He had not *wanted* to be reconciled. He was perhaps *glad* of the chance of escape she had first afforded him by her senseless encouragement of that *hateful* Sir George (alas! how the great are fallen!); and she had tried to force herself upon him, and he had come himself to tell her he would none of her. Oh!—

She starts to her feet and clasps her hands together to prevent herself from bursting into tears of cruel mortification. She walks rapidly up and down the room, planning deep thoughts of vengeance, but no help, no comfort, comes to her. For a long half-hour she so ponders in fruitless search after a calm that will not come, and at the end of it her courage forsakes her. She confesses to herself that she is unhappy, miserable, that all men are detestable, and that above and beyond all his fellows Mr. Ponsonby is *the* most detestable, and that she hates him, and she doesn't care; and then she flings herself into a huge arm-chair, and, letting her face drop upon her lovely naked arms, breaks into bitter weeping.

Mr. Wilding, entering the room a few moments later, finds her in this condition. She tries, indeed, to rise suddenly, and turns her face from him; but to conceal the fact that she is in great distress is impossible.

"Never mind me," says Mr. Wilding, going up to his poor little cousin and patting her shoulder tenderly. "I'm sorry it has come to this; because he's an uncommon good fellow. He has just told me all about it."

"He is a wretch!" says Miss Disney, with startling fervor.

"You ought to be the last to be down upon him," says her cousin reprovingly. "Even supposing he *did* give you a piece of his mind, I think you should be the one to make allowances for a slight display of temper. No fellow likes being done in that sort of way."

"*Done?*"

"My dear child, what's the good of keeping it up before me? I *know* all about it, from start to finish."

"Oh, you *do!*" says Miss Disney, in a tone of bewildered resignation.

"Yes; and, though I am not, as a rule, one of the obnoxious '*I-told-you-so*' sort of people, still, I foresaw that when you *did* do it you would be sorry for it."

"Ah, you saw that?" says Miss Disney, in a tone of even greater bewilderment and resignation.

"*Certainly* I did."

"Yes? And what was it you saw, dear?" asks she meekly.

"Oh, I say, you know," says Mr. Wilding in high disgust,—"that is no way to treat a fellow who is almost your brother, you know. If I *must* be plain, I think it is excessively foolish of you to throw up Frank Ponsonby for the sake of an empty title."

"Is *that* what he told you?" exclaims she, flushing with indignation. "Now, hear the truth from me. It's—it's a *horrible* thing to have to confess; but I'll

trust *you*. I tried to make friends with him, and I sent him a flower, and he wouldn't *have* it; and he came here and told me he wished to set me '*finally free*' (*such* a way of putting it!); and"—her cousin's arm is round her by this time, and she is sobbing her heart out on his shoulder—"I am the most unhappy girl in all the world!"

"Bless me! there must be a mistake somewhere,' says Mr. Wilding, at his wits' end.

"You won't betray me, will you?" sobs his pretty but deeply afflicted cousin.

"Nonsense! Of course not. But tell me about that unfortunate flower."

She tells him.

"Show it to me," says Mr. Wilding, at the close of her confession, assuming the barrister air that gains him daily commendation from the bench. Together, and with the utmost caution, they count the petals again, and at the end look blankly into each other's faces.

"How *could* it have happened?" says Miss Disney, in an awe-stricken tone.

"One petal is missing," says Mr. Wilding, still before the bar. "One of two things must have occurred, —either *you* counted wrongly the first time, or else it was removed by—"

At this moment Katherine Nugent enters the room.

"Oh, Katherine!" cries Alys, and, running to her, throws her unsuspicious arms round her, and tells her all. "My cousin, Mr. Wilding, tells me he, Frank, is suffering as much from this wretched mistake as I am. You gave it to him yourself—with your own hands?"

"Yes," says Katherine, calmly.

Wilding, who is watching her closely, tells himself she does excellently well indeed. "It is a very unfortunate affair," he says, still with his eyes on Miss Nugent.

"Very." Her eyes meet his calmly, unwaveringly.

"Something ought to be done about it at once."

"I quite agree with you. But who is to do it? and what is to be done?"

"I know," says Alys, very quietly, and with a strange amount of determination for her. "I shall explain all to him myself—*to-night.*"

"*You!*" says Miss Nugent, an unpleasant amount of astonishment in her tone.

"Yes. Why not? I think it only due to him," says Mr. Wilding, slowly. "*You* see an objection to this course?"—turning to Katherine.

"I? Oh, *no!* Why *should* I? It is really nothing to me. I have no *right* to an objection. Besides,

there *isn't* one. Frank Ponsonby"—here she compels the girl's eyes to meet hers by the very intensity of her own regard—"is of too generous a nature to see any *indelicacy* in this act of hers."

"Indelicacy!" repeats Alys, growing very pale. "If I speak to him on this subject, can I be accused of *that?*"—turning piteously to her cousin.

"Being a man," says Mr. Wilding, slowly, "I can tell you all the more surely what *his* answer would be to that question. It would be '*No.*'"

"There, dear; Mr. Wilding knows," says Miss Nugent, with a faint smile.

"But, oh, if he should be *wrong!*" says the girl, in an agony of doubt. "Perhaps if some one else were to tell him it would be better; but who?"

"Shall I?" says Katherine, softly.

Wilding, still with his eyes on Katherine, makes no movement.

Katherine, stooping forward, lays her hand on the girl's arm.

There is a long pause. And then the girl, lifting Miss Nugent's hand, holds it for an instant in mid-air, and then gently drops it. Some divine instinct at the same moment makes her fall back, as though to ward the other off. "No, *no.* I will tell him myself," she says, with nervous haste and a profound sigh. She

walks away from them, and, reaching the door, is soon beyond recall.

"A very impulsive girl," says Miss Nugent, turning to Wilding.

"A very good girl, when under no evil influence," returns he, coolly.

"Sir George's, you mean?"

"No."

"Frank's?"

"Certainly not."

"Whose, then?" asks Miss Nugent, with the softest smile.

"To be discourteous is to lose a point," says Wilding, unmoved. "But,"—confidentially,—"if I were *you*, I should—*chuck it up*."

"Slang has always been a buried language to me," says Miss Nugent, politely. "You mean—?"

"So very little already unknown to you that it is hardly worth while my explaining it," says Wilding, genially. "Still, I would repeat my former words, because—" He pauses. Miss Nugent looking to him for a continuation of the sentence, he says, mildly. "Because you haven't the ghost of a chance."

CHAPTER V.

"By some degree of woe
We every bliss must gain."

FINDING herself once more in the silent hall, Miss Disny stops short and sighs again. Then a great longing for fresh air overcomes her, and, passing quickly through the now deserted dining-room, she steps on to the balcony outside, and presently finds herself in the garden.

A silvery light hangs over it. The moon, that "goddess excellently bright," is hanging amid trembling fleecy clouds, like a great lamp lent by the heavens to shed a glow upon the despondent earth.

Again its rays pierce the gloom of the eastern corner of the gardens and shed a mellow lustre upon the forced modesty of Apollo—ivy-clad—and upon the dazzling bunch of marguerites, nodding and drooping in their sleep.

Only a week ago she had stood just here with her *true* love—happy, yet hardly aware of the depth of her happiness; and now with what a different gaze she looks upon the world! Knowledge has come to her *too late*. Only with the *loss* of it has come the full appreciation of the thing she has lost.

Something in the scene before her brings prominently forward a doubt that ever since her last interview with Ponsonby has been weighing heavily upon her. Now, as it asserts itself fully, it sends a little chill to her heart.

In spite of all her cousin has said, may not her late reckless encouragement of Sir George have killed the love once felt for her by Ponsonby? This terrible thought grows stronger the more she dwells upon it, and at length grows into such tremendous proportions that her heart dies within her.

If she now seeks a second explanation with—with Mr. Ponsonby, will he not be justified in thinking she is seeking to throw herself upon his mercy, and that she is desirous of renewing old associations with him at any cost?

She grows crimson as this thought comes to her, and tears of mortification rise to her eyes. No! she can never speak to him on this subject—*never!* She *will* not! She puts up her hands to her face, as though to hide her shamed eyes even from the tender moonlight, and in so doing hastily decides that she now forever abandons all idea of seeking an interview with Ponsonby.

She will not speak to him; she will not *see* him again, if possible! Deriving some mysterious com-

fort from this resolution, and feeling therefore somewhat better, she takes down her hands from her eyes, and in so doing finds herself face to face with Ponsonby.

She turns as white as death; but with the necessity for speaking comes a rush of womanly dignity that reduces her to instant calm and adds tenfold to her girlish grace and sweetness.

"Let me speak to you for one moment," she says impulsively, with a slight motion toward him. His sudden presence has convinced her that her late cowardly resolution had in it no element of *right*, and that an explanation is due not more to her than to him.

"Certainly," he says very gently. All the sternness is gone from his tone, a settled melancholy having taken its place. Encouraged, though weakened, by this change in him, she goes on hurriedly.

"There is something I *must* tell you," she says tremulously. "But first"—throwing up her head with a little proud gesture that becomes her infinitely—"I would have you understand that what I have to say cannot in *any* way alter the relations now existing between us. We are separated *forever*. No one (I am glad to think at this moment) can know that better than you."

"No one," corroborates Mr. Ponsonby, in a tone that

has acquired even a deeper dye, so far as misery is concerned.

"I am glad of that," says the girl readily. Yet an intelligent observer might have failed to see where the gladness lay: certainly not in voice, or lips, or eyes. Mr. Ponsonby, I regret to say, proves himself on this occasion (only) wanting in intelligence, as he openly accepts her statement at her own value, and grows in dejection thereby. "I am *very* glad of it," repeats Alys unsteadily and with now averted eyes and a paltry assumption of content, "because I can now safely tell you, without fear of misconception on your part, that it was all a mistake about that marguerite I sent you an hour ago. At *that* time," (by her *manner*, it might reasonably be supposed again by the intelligent listener that the time mentioned is a year agone) "I was troubled, and—and ashamed of myself (I am neither now), and anxious to let you know that—that I had not changed toward you in any way, in spite of anything foolish in me that might have induced you to think otherwise."

There is something in this rebellious speech so sadly regretful, and so very near to tears, that instinctively Mr. Ponsonby goes a step closer to her, and puts out his hand as though to take hers; but she waves him back imperatively.

"When I sent you that flower," she goes on, her voice taking a still prouder ring as she feels the humiliation of her confession, and with her soft eyes suffused with tears of childish grief and agitation, "I thought—I *firmly believed*—it was conveying to you the message 'I love you!' I counted the petals carefully; I made sure not one was missing; but I suppose I counted badly. I tell you this now for no motive but the natural wish that you should not believe me altogether heartless. You understand me? You *must* know"—passionately—"that for this reason alone I have spoken to you to-night."

"I *do* know," says the young man earnestly. Again he goes nearer to her. There is suppressed hope and growing excitement in his face and manner.

"Not that it matters now," says Miss Disney, her voice trembling more and more. "Nothing matters any more at all! We have both learned to be indifferent to each other, and—and—I hope I shall never, *never*, NEVER see you again after to-night!"

Here the voice passes beyond all trembling, having broken down and given place to bitter weeping.

She has lifted her hands to cover her face, and so stands before him, a little, slender, grief-laden figure, on which the gentle moon is shining, lighting up the

pretty rounded arms and the gold-brown tresses of the bowed head. But for not half so long as it takes to write this does she so stand. In a moment she is in his arms, and is sobbing out the remainder of her grief upon his breast.

He has drawn her close to him, and closer still, until their hearts beat almost in unison.

"My darling," he says with passionate fondness, "my dear, *dear* love, do not cry like that. I think—I never thought it until to-night—but now I *do* think that you love me. Alys, tell me I am not deceiving myself."

She can find no words, but, still with her face hidden upon his breast, lifts her arms and slips them lovingly round his neck. It is an answer all-sufficient.

Never before has she so abandoned herself to him, and for the first time the gladness of possession enters into his soul.

"You are mine now," he says, tightening his clasp round her, "now, and forever! Let us go back a week in our lives, and forget that these last miserable seven days have ever been. You—you don't *care* for that fellow Grande?"

"There is only one person on earth I care for, and that is *you!*" says the girl, clinging to him.

"And yet—"

"Yes, yes; I know all that. I should not have believed her, but she told me you thought me a baby a mere silly child—who could have no lover but you."

"*Who* told you all this?" demands he, with darkening brows.

"Katherine, your cousin. But"—dissolving into tears again—"it wasn't *true*, Frank, was it?"

"It was not, indeed," says Mr. Ponsonby grimly. "These last few days have proved it. I cannot help feeling that I am depriving you of a title."

"You *said* you would forget this past horrid week," says Miss Disney reproachfully, "and now you are scolding me about it."

"Well, it shall be my last scolding," says Ponsonby. "And as for the other things, you say I thought of you as a child. I tell you now, with your heart against mine, that I thought of you only as the woman I loved beyond all this earth contains."

"I know it now; I was mad to doubt you," says Alys remorsefully; "but she *said* it; and, knowing you are superior to me in every way, I felt it easy to believe her."

"And it was she, too, who brought me the marguerite," says Ponsonby musingly, in a low tone. A sudden thought occurring to him, he tightens his grasp on her arm. Then he recovers himself.

"Why think of *anything?*" he says, placing his lips to hers. "Let us only remember that we belong to each other by the divine right of love. All else may readily be forgotten."

"No," says the girl, leaning back in his embrace so as to look into his eyes. "I shall never forget this, our first and last quarrel. I don't *want* to! I am *glad* of it!"

"*Glad*, my soul?"—regretfully.

"Yes,"—triumphantly,—"*very* glad. Because," a smile fighting with the tears that still linger on her lashes, "but for *it* I should never have known how entirely *you* love *me*, and *I you!*"

"My beloved!" murmurs he with ineffable fondness.

THE WITCHING HOUR.

"The ghost, if ghost it were, seem'd a sweet soul."
Don Juan.

"I'M very sorry, mum, but I can't help it. I've struggled against my feelin's most manful, but I know I couldn't spend another night beneath this roof for untold gold."

"This is dreadful!" says Mrs. Vernon, rising from her chair, an expression of despair overspreading her gentle features. "This is the third servant I have lost this week: first Hardy, then Jane, and now you. I don't know what is to be done, I'm sure."

"Tell us all about it, cook," puts in a pretty plaintive voice that betrays a certain amount of languor. The voice belongs to Dolores, who, looking up with much interest from among her pillows, pushes back the lace curtains of the window, the better to see cook, who is standing, florid and melancholy, in the centre of the drawing-room.

"I'll tell you all I know, Miss Vernon; and, to my

thinking, that is too much. Of course, if it was only hearsay, I'd hold my tongue; but, when it comes to seeing with my own two eyes, there's an end of everything. The maids had been talking awful, as you know; but, as they young things ofter have the skeers for want of something better to do, I didn't believe 'em—until last night." Mrs. Mashem pauses.

"I feel as if I were going to have the 'skeers' myself!" interposes Dolores, softly.

"As I was going to bed, miss, the neuralgia came on me dreadful, and I said to myself I'd go and ask your maid for the laudanum. It was about twelve, or it might be one—I won't swear to a minit—when, just as I reached the corridor that opens off the picture-gallery, I looked down, and there, just at the very end of it, mounting the stone stairs that lead to the turret, I saw what made my blood run cold!"

Again cook pauses to fan her fevered brow. Mrs. Vernon sinks back into her chair; Dolores lays down her book.

"Oh, do go on, cook!" says the latter, who is evidently beginning to enjoy herself immensely. "You are immeasurably better than anything Mr. Mudie can supply. You are positively thrilling. It must be so delicious this weather to feel one's blood 'run cold.'"

"It was a figure, miss," continues cook, gravely, "the tallest I ever see—covered with a long white trailing garmint, and with something on to its head. It walked very majestic like; and I think," adds cook, in a sepulchral tone, "though I won't vow to it, that there was dark spots upon the garmint—spots of blood! Anyhow, it went right up-stairs before my very eyes to the room where master's great-grandfather's lady cut her throat."

"But, cook," interposes Mrs. Vernon, very meekly, "Mr. Vernon's great-grandfather's lady didn't cut her throat at all."

"Well, mum, they say she did," replies cook, with deep respect.

"Mamma, please do not interrupt Mrs. Mashem," says Dolores: "I am absolutely consumed with a desire to know all. Finish, cook."

"Well, miss, the sperrit disappeared round the corner, and entered your painting-room—which I really think, Miss Dolores, you ought never to paint there again, leastways by yourself. My heart stopped beating, my 'air rose on my 'ead, and—begging your pardon, mum—the water just dropped off my face. I'm not ashamed to say I bolted; an' I verily believe, had I found Mary's door fastened against me, I should ha' swooned on the spot!"

Here cook, who was a devoted admirer of 'penny dreadfuls' and her own powers of eloquence, pauses through lack of breath.

"It is the most unfortunate thing I ever heard of," says poor Mrs. Vernon.

"It is the very funniest thing I ever heard of," puts in Dolores, who, in spite of her still weak health, is shaking with laughter.

"I wish, cook, you would think it over," says Mrs. Vernon. "I am so sorry you are going."

"So am I, mum," returns cook, honestly affected. "I can't bear to leave a 'ouse that suits me as this does, an' which I 'ope 'umbly I also suited; but I couldn't get my 'ealth 'ere, mum, I'm that nervious."

"How can you laugh, Dolores?" says Mrs. Vernon, reproachfully.

"How can I help it, you mean, when I think of cook 'nervious,' and with her ''air' on end?" answers Dolores, and then, turning to the servant, she adds, "Oh, cook, I think it is very unkind of you to forsake me, when you know I can eat nothing since my illness but what is made by your own hands! You will drive me to distraction—*and* Italy, a month before my time, as, if I remain here, I know I shall be starved to death."

"An' a good thing too, Miss Dolores," says cook, sol-

emnly; "a flitting is the best thing could 'appen you. For when ghosts come into a 'ouse no one can say what will turn up."

"Well, well, cook, it can't be helped," says Mrs. Vernon, hastily, yet with regret. And cook, having made an elaborate courtesy, withdraws.

"What is to be done?" asks Mrs. Vernon, turning to her daughter. "The matter grows serious. I almost" —with a slight laugh—"begin to believe in this tiresome ghost myself. How on earth did they hear of that woman who cut her throat?"

"I thought you said she didn't," says Dolores, surprised.

"No: I merely parried the thrust. Cook said your 'great-grandfather's lady.' Now, it was his steward's wife, who went mad, poor soul, and cut her throat, or stabbed herself, or did something equally horrid, in that room."

"In my painting-room?" says Dolores, opening her great violet eyes to their widest. "How shocking! Now, why did she choose that room of all others? I must say I think it is very rude of people to go about cutting their throats all over other people's houses. I shan't be able to paint there in comfort for the future I shall always be fancying I see unpleasant-looking

ladies hovering round me, with their heads under their arms."

"I shall be glad of anything that keeps you from stooping over your painting. It is ruining your health. Have you forgotten the terrible fever you have just come through? And can't you see you can never get strong without perfect rest? You are too excitable, child, and your painting makes your brain run riot."

"I am infatuated about my last picture, I confess," returns Dolores, laughing, and coloring until all her delicate pale little face is pink as a June rose: "sometimes I even dream of it."

"I wonder what we shall get for dinner to-day?" says Mrs. Vernon, presently, in a moody tone. I shudder when I think of it. I can telegraph to town, of course, and have another woman in time for to-morrow's dinner; but nothing can redeem to night's. And Frank here, too! It is really more than provoking!"

"I dare say even Frank can exist on cold roast beef for one night—or whatever else it chance to be," remarks Dolores, coldly, with a little scornful uplifting of her chin; whereupon her mother regards her with some scrutiny and a good deal of carefully suppressed disappointment.

"Have you and Frank been quarrelling?" Mrs. Ver-

non asks, after a pause. "Now you speak of him always with a sneer or a shrug, and only a few days ago I had hoped—I think him so much to be liked."

"So do I."

"Is he not very agreeable?"

Dolores laughs again, but there is a faint suspicion of constraint in her merriment this time.

"Very," she says; "and he has a charming property quite close to ours, and it would be so delightful to have me always near you; and he is so fond of you, and he loves papa quite like a son! Isn't that it? I think I have heard it all a thousand times. But I don't want to get married, and I shall be nearer to you here in my own home than I can be anywhere else. Mamma, come here and give me a kiss. You know you are always the prettiest creature in the world; but, when you have that would-be reproachful look in your lovely eyes, you are irresistible, and I adore you!"

Mrs. Vernon succumbs to her charmer, and bends with a smile to receive and return the soft hug bestowed upon her by her spoiled darling; after which she goes away sighing to relate her woes to her husband.

Hardly had she left the drawing-room when the door is once more opened, and a young man comes in. He is tall, broad-shouldered, and bronzed. He is, in fact, one

of those people it does one good to look at, though just now his handsome kindly face wears a discontented—not to say aggrieved—expression very foreign to it.

"You?" says Miss Dolores, letting her eyes rest indolently upon him. "Talk of somebody—"

"Were you talking of me? How unfortunate I am? Beyond a doubt, then, you were saying something disparaging," rejoins the young man, a shade of bitterness in his tone.

"As usual,"—carelessly,—"you wrong me. I think, on the contrary, I was saying something good. Let me see,"—with the indifferent air of one who seeks to recall some trivial matter scarcely worth remembrance: "I was just saying that you had a charming property, and that you managed it marvellously, that you were passable in appearance, and had very reasonable manners."

"I'm sure I'm infinitely obliged; though perhaps it can hardly be called praise to say a man has a large property."

"Excellent praise, I think, as the world goes. Surely it is ever so much better than having a large heart. That would be too *rococo* a possession nowadays; and you at least need not be accused of it. You

are ungrateful. I really think I said all I could for you."

"I can quite understand that. It would indeed be abject folly on my part to come to *you* for a character. However, it was exceedingly good of you to speak about me at all. Did you say anything else?"

"How you cross-examine! Yes, I believe I did,"—lazily unfurling a huge white fan and waving it to and fro. "I said I didn't care much about you—as I never fancy people who—don't fancy me."

"I don't believe you said that."

"No? You are in one of your talking moods to-day. I am afraid I spoke prematurely just now when I accredited you with good manners. Nevertheless I *did* say all that."

"You may have said it,"—with some indignation. "You certainly didn't mean all of it."

"I did mean all of it."

"You can tell me honestly that you believe from your heart I don't care for you! Dolores, how can you speak like that? You know you are the only woman on earth I love."

"The last woman, you mean."

"The first and last. Why don't you understand me? Is it that you won't? Only ten days ago I madly

hoped you were beginning to care for me a little, and suddenly you accepted a most frivolous excuse to break off with me entirely."

"No two persons agree on certain subjects. Of course it is impossible to know what may seem frivolous in your eyes; but to know you had been head over ears in love with my own cousin only a month ago didn't seem to me a frivolous excuse for refusing to listen longer to your ridiculous speeches."

Mr. Harley does not like to hear his vows of affection called "ridiculous speeches." He colors, and feels that he is growing angry.

"I have told you over and over again," he says, with a visible effort at calmness that only betrays more surely the ill-temper that is mastering him, "that your cousin is either making a very curious mistake or—telling a falsehood."

A sudden flame of wrath flashes from Dolores's great violet eyes.

"Say nothing uncivil of Felicia," she says, warmly· "she is truth itself. I have known her all my life. She is incapable of falsehood."

"Then it is inexplicable. You say Felicia is truth itself, and yet what is it she says?"

"Do you want to hear again?" asks Dolores, drawing a letter from the pocket of her white gown.

"Well, you shall, if only to refresh your memory, though I hardly think it requires it."

Opening the dainty, scented epistle in her hand, she reads:

"'So Mr. Harley—my Mr. Harley, as I used to call him—is staying with you. How strangely things happen! I did not know you and he were acquainted.'"

"Nor were we a month ago," puts in Dolores, in a tone that plainly expresses deep regret that such an acquaintanceship should have been formed.

Mr. Harley winces.

"It was indeed an evil wind that drove me to this place after an absence of so many years," he says, in return. "Pray go on."

"'I knew he was leaving town for a short time and going into Leicestershire, but had no idea his destination was the Towers until I heard from you. Is he not *beau garçon*, and very much as he ought to be? I shall be quite disappointed if you don't agree with me, as I honestly confess to a little tenderness in that direction. Indeed, I should be ungrateful otherwise, as, when here, he was my shadow, and a very substantial one. At balls, operas, small-and-earlies, everywhere, he was always by my side. I found him everything that was delightful, and evidently he found me

the same. Though I have had a good many lovers in my time, I don't think I ever had one so utterly "mine own" as this one. By the by, dearest, how shockingly you scribble! One can hardly make out—'

"There—I needn't go on," says Dolores, half impatiently; "that is quite enough."

"Quite too much. Of course in town one meets the same people night after night at every ball that comes off; and your cousin and I were very good friends. But she must be very conceited to imagine that because I was seen at Lady B.'s or C.'s I went there expressly to meet her. Besides, there was another fellow. It is really too absurd! May I see the letter?"

"Certainly. It is 'Harley,' is it not?"

"It might be anything, I think. I never saw so careless a hand."

"It is very like mine," returns Dolores.

"I wish," says the young man, very earnestly, "you would write and ask your cousin about this."

"Oh, no!" answers Miss Vernon, hastily, with a vivid blush; then provokingly, as though to condone the blush, "it would be too much trouble."

"I forgot that. As I said before, this letter has afforded you the excuse you wanted."

"I think you are extremely rude," says Miss Vernon.

"Well,"—with growing vehemence,—"is there no reason in what I say? Only a fortnight ago you almost promised to be my wife, and now you positively seem to hate me. What am I to think?"

"What am *I* to think?"—with an expressive glance at the luckless letter.

"I shall go back to town to-morrow," proceeds Harley, after a moody silence spent in twisting an unoffending button off his waistcoat.

"You needn't show such unflattering haste to be gone," says Dolores, deliberately. "Felicia is coming down here next week."

Harley turns pale, and throwing up his head with a gesture full of haughtiness, turns his face to hers. His eyes are stern, but filled with a certain reproach.

"Because you are a woman," he says, in a low tone, "is a principal reason why you should not offer me an insult. I have already told you that your cousin's coming or going is of no consequence to me."

Dolores is a little subdued by this unexpected outburst.

"I am sorry if I have offended you," she says, quietly. "I am also sorry you should decide on leaving the Towers so soon. Why go yet?"

"Why stay? I am only a nuisance to myself and —you!"

"Oh, no! Surely the house is large enough for us all. You need not annoy me. Besides, you don't annoy me. Indeed,"—with an odd little smile, sweet as it is swift, and just one straight glance upwards from the azure eyes,—"I shall quite miss you, because—How uncomfortable these pillows are! Would it"—another glance—"trouble you very much to shake them up a little? Thank you! I was saying if you desert me I shall positively miss you, because then I shall have no one to quarrel with, except the ghosts. Ah, that reminds me. Our particular ghost has come again!"

"Has it?"—with much surprise. He is beginning to feel considerably better. "I hoped it was laid forever. Any more domestics showing signs of distress? Tell me about it."

"I shall be delighted"—demurely—"if you will only sit down, and not look as though you were going to start for London this moment."

Then she tells him all about the spirit's latest appearance, the trailing garments, and Mrs. Mashem's flight.

"Perhaps, after all, you were wise when you talked of going," she says, when her tale has come to an end.

"We shan't have any dinner to-night, and probably no breakfast in the morning. I doubt if you will get anything beyond prison fare for the next few days. Nevertheless, I think it would be cowardly of you to leave me here all alone to be devoured by a horrid ghost."

Mr. Harley smiles; and nothing more is said just then about leaving the Towers.

That evening, when dinner is over, and the servants have taken their lingering departure, and Miss Vernon is beginning to grow happy over her fruit, Mr. Vernon says suddenly and without preamble, in his usual clear and healthy tone:

"Something must be done."

A faint pause follows this obscure speech. Then Dolores says, with the utmost *bonhommie:*

"I always agree with you, papa, don't I? But I confess I should like to know what is the 'thing,' and who is to do it."

"Your mother has been telling me everything," explains Mr. Vernon; "and the loss of a cook is no joke. This trick—for such it is, I feel convinced—must be exposed, this fictitious ghost unearthed. Mrs. Mashem is a very sensible woman, and the finest hand at white soup I know; and I don't believe she ever fainted without just cause."

"She didn't faint, papa; she only 'swoonded,'" says Dolores, meekly.

"Well, I really think there is something in it," returns her father.

"And I think I would do almost anything for the one who would discover the imposture," says Dolores, dreamily gazing—as though unconsciously, as though without ulterior meaning—at Harley.

"I shall sit up myself to-night from twelve to two," declares Mr. Vernon, with the air of a hero. Mr. Vernon dearly loves his bed.

"Oh, Harry," says his wife, nervously, "I hope you won't dream of such a thing! Remember the attack you had on your chest last year. Surely one of the men can do it?" Deep in the recesses of Mrs. Vernon's heart—where she hopes it will rest undiscovered—lies a real and palpable fear of this nocturnal visitant, a fear that drives her to bed at eleven o'clock sharp, and compels her, when any suspicious noises make themselves heard during the small hours, to smother her head beneath the bedclothes.

"Tut, nonsense, my dear! my chest is as strong as ever it was!" returns Mr. Vernon, who would have scorned to confess to a malady of any sort.

. . . . . .

"Papa, you are not to sit up," says Dolores,

promptly. "I shan't allow it; I forbid it altogether: so put it out of your head." She accompanies this dictatorial speech with several grave little nods and a charming smile.

Nobody ever contradicts Dolores. So Mr. Vernon pats the small white hand lying near his own on the table-cloth—which looks quite dingy beside it—and says no more.

"I shall sit up to-night," says Harley, suddenly, with an air of determination. "I like sitting up; and I have quite set my heart on finding this ghost."

Here he returns Dolores's former glance with interest; but that young lady by neither word nor glance shows signs of comprehension. She gazes back at him innocently, without so much as a quiver in her long lashes, and tells him he is very brave, and asks him politely—very politely—to try another peach, they are *so* good.

. . . . . .

The midnight hour has chimed long since. All the house is still. Through the mullioned window at the end of the long picture-gallery great waves of moonlight are pouring, turning all they touch into palest silver, lighting up the grim warriors, and bathing in their cool rays the simpering dames that line the walls.

"How beautiful on yonder casement-panes
The mild moon gazes! Mark
With what a lovely and majestic step
She treads the heavenly hills!
And, oh, how soft, how silently she pours
Her chastened radiance on the scene below;
And hill and dale and tower
Drink the pure flood of light!
Roll on, roll thus, queen of the midnight hour.
Forever beautiful!"

The light is so intense that one might almost think it day, but for the unbroken stillness and the impene trable shroud—chill and silent—that, hanging over all, betrays the presence of night.

Not the faintest noise, not even the nimble scampering of some terrified mouse, comes to break the monotonous quiet that reigns everywhere, except the souud of Mr. Harley's feet as he marches disconsolately up and down the east corridor.

It is now a quarter-past one, and as yet no ghost has put in an appearance.

It is really too bad! Perhaps, when undertaking his present task, Mr. Harley devoutiy hoped no unearthly visitor would present himself or herself to him; but, now that the watch is nearly over and nothing has come of it, he feels aggrieved, and as though he had been done out of something.

His thoughts, as he paces to and fro in the lonely hours, with nothing stirring save himself and the imperturbable clocks, are not very cheerful. He loves, but the desire of his heart is unattainable. Of course he is not the only man whose hopes have been nipped in the bud—who has found himself wrecked when in sight of port; but this thought, though carefully brought to the front, fails to give consolation.

He goes over the conversation of the morning again and again, omitting not the slightest word or look, and he inwardly breathes an uncomplimentary word or two upon Felicia. Then he rouses himself with a start, and, glancing at his watch, sees it is nearly two, and decides on going to bed. Pshaw! he might have known it was all mere foolish superstition on the part of a few uneducated women! Servants, as a rule, delight in the supernatural. The idea of any sane person in the nineteenth century thinking he could see a disembodied spirit! Ah! What is that?

At this point there is a break in Mr. Harley's thoughts; his whole mind flies into his eyes. At first his attention is attracted by a faint rustle; then comes an indistinct patter as of high-heeled shoes; and now —*now* a vague shadowy form emerges from the west corridor—the one parallel to his—and crosses the picture-gallery right within his view. As it advances

slowly and without suspicion of haste into the full light of the brilliant moon-beams, which seem to wrap it in a pale splendor, it appears to the breathless spectator to be indeed of unusual height. It wears a gown, long and of marvellous purity; one hand is slightly extended, and its face is turned aside, as with measured steps it reaches and begins to ascend the stone staircase that leads to the turret-chamber—Dolores's painting-room!

Mr. Harley cannot say that he feels no fear. His heart beats violently, and his breath comes unpleasantly fast. After an instant's hesitation, however, he recovers himself, and quickly but noiselessly follows the ghostly figure—now almost out of sight—and, as he gains the top of the stairs, is just in time to see the tail of the snowy gown disappear into the painting-room.

At this moment it occurs to him that ladies long buried with severed throats are not nice to look upon; but he remembers some one who said she would do almost anything for him who should come face to face with this ghost, and he goes forward bravely.

Within the turret-chamber, also, Diana is holding full sway. The whole room is flooded with moonlight; the minutest article may be seen; but the only object Harley sees is the ghost herself, standing by the open easel.

It is Dolores! A very lovely Dolores, but a Dolores lost in slumber! The violet eyes are wide open, but they are sightless, and she evidently sees only with her "mind's eye." She is gazing with rapt and pleased attention at the canvas before her, a picture half completed, while one hand wanders restlessly, aimlessly, among the brushes and paints near her.

Harley is spell-bound and a good deal puzzled. He hardly knows what to do. He is afraid to leave her; he is afraid to wake her. His doubts at this juncture are happily set at rest forever. A delicious but impatient breeze, born of the summer night, comes with a rush through an open window, and the door, half closed already, shuts with a loud bang.

Mr. Harley unconsciously retires into the shadow, and Miss Vernon, with a deep sigh and the lazy gesture of an awakening child, stretches out her white arms—which, under the loose sleeves of her dressing-gown, gleam like rounded marble—and wakes!

At first she looks around her, as though still half unconscious; but, as remembrance returns, and she finds herself standing in a patch of moonlight, when she had believed herself safe between two fair lavender-scented sheets, she grows frightened, and with a gesture full of horror puts both her hands up to her head.

"Ah, what is it? Where am I?" she cries, in a terrified tone that strikes her hearer with dismay.

He abandons the shadow, and, coming forward anxiously, takes down one of her trembling hands and holds it within his own reassuringly.

"Dolores, don't be frightened," he says, hurriedly. "It is nothing. You were dreaming of your picture, and you walked up here, and I followed you, and—and that is all."

"Oh, it is a great deal!" cries poor Dolores, clinging to him. "It is like a fearful nightmare. And"—distrustfully—"how do you know I had a dream? I remember nothing of it. And did I really walk up here all by myself, or"—with a faint nervous laugh and a shuddering glance behind her—"did the ghost bring me?"

"My dear child," says Harley, unable to repress a smile, "do not be angry with me for saying so, but I am afraid you yourself must be regarded as the—impostor!"

"As what?"

"This appalling ghost that has frightened away all your best servants," answers Harley.

"Do you really think so?" says Dolores, with some disgust. "Have I been walking in my sleep for the past fortnight? Oh, it is too absurd! And I shall be

horribly laughed at! You must promise not to tell any one of it except papa and mamma. They won't dare to laugh at me."

"I will make you any promise you like."

"And so," says Dolores, growing amused now that her fear is at an end, "you have actually succeeded in bringing to light this evil spirit? And it is your first attempt, too! I really think you deserve the Victoria Cross, or a gold medal, or something."

"I certainly think I do deserve something," says Frank, meaningly.

"And doubtless you will get it. But, even if you don't, remember, 'Virtue is its own reward.'"

"A very poor reward," returns Harley; then, with great earnestness, "Dolores, shall we never be friends again?"

"Well, I don't believe we ever shall," says Dolores.

Even Miss Vernon must think this a very unkind speech, because she moves back a step or two impatiently, and, in so doing, touches a small table near her, causing some books upon it to fall heavily to the ground. Harley, to cover his chagrin, stoops to pick them up.

"Be careful of them," says Dolores, with a cruelty that makes her hate herself, although she cannot resist the desire to say it; "be careful: they belong to Felicia!"

A photograph has fallen from one of the books, face uppermost, upon the floor. Harley, lifting it, regards it carelessly, and says, in an indifferent tone, that she may see he is not utterly crushed by her incivility:

"I know this face. I have seen him often in town —with your cousin."

The photograph represents a young man dressed in Hussar uniform.

"Yes; I suppose he is a friend of Felicia's. I found the picture in that book when she left us. His name is written by her at the back of it."

"Ah, so it is! 'Hanley,' is it?"—uncertainly. "Why, it might be 'Harley,' or 'Hanley,' or anything!" Then suddenly he lifts his head, his color deepens, and a quick light as of inspiration comes into his dark eyes. "There has been a mistake," he says, rapidly. "I see it all now. It was not my name your cousin mentioned in her letter; it was Hanley's. He was quite devoted to her all last season—her very 'shadow,' as she herself says. Can't you understand?"

"Let me look," says Dolores, cautiously, though indeed conviction has seized upon her also; and then in turn she scrutinizes the name Felicia has scribbled in her rambling writing. And in truth it might be

"Harley," or "Hanley:" it would be difficult to decide which.

"How you have wronged me!" says the young man, a world of reproach in his tone. "Now confess that I am in the right."

"Yes, I suppose so; and I am quite wrong," answers Miss Vernon, coldly, who hardly enjoys her defeat.

"Dolores, surely now you owe me some reparation," urges he, eagerly. "Consider all I have suffered! Think how unhappy I have been!"

"Dear me! how late it is!" says Dolores, promptly. "I shall be quite knocked up to-morrow. You forget how delicate I still am. Mamma would be so angry if she thought I was awake at this hour."

She has reached the door, and has opened it by this time.

"But, Dolores—" cries Frank, following.

"Hush!" says that young lady, mysteriously, placing her finger upon her lip. "Not a word, not a syllable, for your life! The slightest whisper might be overheard, and then they would say there were two ghosts instead of one."

Down-stairs she goes on tiptoe. But during the descent she has had time for reflection; for, as she reaches her chamber door, she pauses, and, with a

perfect change of manner and an adorable smile, holds out her hand to him.

"Good-night," she says.

"Under existing circumstances it is a mockery to wish me that," rejoins Harley, retaining her hand. "How can I find rest when you are estranged from me? Say one kind word before you go."

"What would you have me say?" this little coquette asks, with a protesting air, though she suffers him to keep her hand prisoner.

"That you will try to love me, and that you will marry me."

"That would be two kind words."

"Well, say them. Have you forgotten? At dinner you said you would do anything for me if I succeeded in my quest."

"My dear Frank, consider! Would you marry a ghost? Are you not afraid that some day I shall vanish out of your sight?"

"I am afraid of nothing but your indifference."

"What a romantic situation!" says Dolores, laughing softly. "Unlimited moonlight, a proposal, a stalwart knight, a fair but harassed maiden! I don't believe you see a bit of it."

"I can see only one thing when I am looking at you."

"What a charming speech!—and I adore pretty speeches when addressed to myself! Well, yes, then, since you will have it so. I will marry you—some day. And now, as a talisman against evil dreams, I will give you just one little kiss to carry away with you."

So saying, she lays her hands lightly upon his shoulders, and turns a very pink cheek to him—after which, almost before he has time to assure himself of his good fortune, she slips from his embrace, and her unfriendly chamber door, closing suddenly, hides her from his longing eyes.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

CHAPTER I.

"Is it very bad? Do you think it will mark her? How unfortunate I am!"

"Oh, it won't signify—*much*," says the major, making a feeble attempt at consolation.

The groom is on his knees, washing down the mare's leg. As he washes, the red raw patch shows out with ominous distinctness from the glossy dark brown skin that surrounds it; and Cissy, standing in her riding habit, whip in hand, regarding the operation, begins to look the very picture of ill-concealed misery.

"How dreadfully bad it looks now!" she says fearfully.

"Not at all," replies the major.

"I cannot imagine how it happened; she is usually such a clean jumper," goes on Cissy, diligently searching for excuses. "I never in my life injured a mount before, and I would not have harmed *this* one for all the world. Captain Halkett will be so awfully angry."

"Nonsense! You don't suppose he will bite you, do you? Think of his angelic temper and your privileges as a woman. He daren't blow you up, you know."

"It is not so much that,"—with hesitation. "Of course I know he will *say* nothing, but he will *think* the more; and—"

"Like the parrot," interrupts the major.

"And he will look so annoyed," goes on Cissy, torturing herself with immense success. "I would not for anything it had occurred. I do think I am the unluckiest girl on earth."

"Are you in love with him?" suddenly asks the major, sharply.

"In love with him? What an absurd question! Of course I am not," says Cissy, angrily, while blushing in the most furious and uncalled-for manner. "What *can* have put such a ridiculous idea into your head?"

"Well,"—sulkily,—"you are so afraid of vexing him, for one thing."

"Not a bit more afraid of him than I would be of you or any other man, under the circumstances," declares Cissy, with exemplary candor. "But it is not a pleasant thing at any time to injure a favorite hunter; and the mare, for some reason or other, is a special darling with Captain Halkett. Indeed, it was

only yesterday I heard him saying he valued her more than any animal he had ever had."

"Given him by one of the fair sex, most likely," says the major, with vicious intent.

"Very probably," returns Cissy, quietly, who carries a very game little heart beneath her pretty Irish skin, and would have died rather than betray any undue emotion. Nevertheless, it must be confessed, her color faintly wavers and fades away a little, only to return with tenfold brilliance as she sees Captain Halkett pass the stable window.

"Here he is!" she cries, hurriedly. "Now what *shall* I do?"

"Nothing, if my advice is worth anything," says the major, sententiously.

Captain Halkett, coming slowly up the yard, cigar in mouth as usual, and hands thrust deep in the pockets of his shooting-coat, sees Cissy, Major Blake, and the groom on his knees beside the mare. He takes in the whole situation at a glance. Throwing away his cigar, he turns to Cissy and says, pleasantly, "Good-morning, Miss Mordaunt. Had a good day, I hope?"

"Yes; thanks—very; that is, *no*, not at all," says Cissy, nervously. "I am afraid you will be horribly angry. But the fact is, Major Blake and I were com-

ing quietly home—cantering through the Park fields, at the last gap some sharp stone caught the Baby's leg, and has hurt her, as you see. I—I am *very* sorry about it," concludes Miss Mordaunt, genuinely vexed for the mishap.

"Don't say that," entreats Halkett, gently; "and don't vex yourself. I would rather the mare was dead than that you tormented yourself about her. Besides," —stooping to examine the injury,—"from what I can see it is only skin-deep, and won't matter in a day or two; eh, Connor?"

"Yes, sir; only a scratch, sir. Right as ever in a week, sir."

These words carry balm to Miss Mordaunt's breast, and presently, the bandages being finally adjusted and the Baby consoled by an additional feed, they leave the stables, and Blake diverging to the right, Miss Mordaunt and Halkett go leisurely towards the house.

As they reach the stone steps leading to the hall door, Cissy pauses. "You are *sure* you forgive me?" she asks, sweetly.

"How can you speak to me like that?" says Halkett, almost angry. "Did you think I should cut up rough with *you?* What an ill-tempered brute you must consider me! You ought to know me better by this time."

"I have not known you for so very long," says Cissy,

smiling; then impulsively, while her color once more deepens, "Why is that horse such a favorite with you? —beyond all others, I mean. Was it a present?"

"Yes," says Halkett, in a low voice.

"From a very dear friend?"

"Very dear; more than a friend."

"From—a gentleman?"

"No. From a lady," says Halkett, shortly, and turns away his head.

On the instant, the words the major had uttered in the stables come back to Miss Mordaunt's mind, and without further comment she sweeps past Halkett into the house, and he sees her no more until dinner-time.

When half-past seven chimes out, and the solemn retainer of the house of Mordaunt announces dinner as being served, both Major Blake and Captain Halkett make a hard fight of it to take Miss Cissy down, but Fate, in the person of Sir Thomas Lobin, interferes, and balks them of their prey. Halkett, however, may be said to have the best of it, as he succeeds in seating himself directly opposite his Irish divinity, and so can watch the changes of her beloved face, and perhaps edge in a word or two, addressed particularly to her, during the repast. All this can be the more readily accomplished, as he has been told off to a young lady who, if not actually insane, is at all events three

parts silly, and so does not feel it incumbent upon him to supply her with the orthodox amount of small talk.

Major Blake, falling into line, finds himself presently situated somewhat low down, with Mrs. Fairfax on one side of him, and Grace Elton, a cousin of Cissy's, on the other. If it were not that his thoughts are altogether centred on Miss Mordaunt, he might have considered himself in luck, as he is undoubtedly in very good quarters. Grace Elton is as unaffected as she is charming, and extremely pretty into the bargain. But the major will neither acknowledge nor see anything beyond the tip of Cissy's nose, as it shows itself provokingly every now and then from behind the épergne.

On a line with Sir Thomas, and the third from him, sits Mrs. Leyton, the Indian widow, in a ravishing costume of pearl and blue that speaks alone of Worth. She is looking wonderfully handsome to-night, and has a bright, adorable spot on each cheek that is *not* born of rouge. She is keeping her hand in by trying a little mild flirtation with the vicar, who occupies her right, and is making very pretty play; while his daughter—who is almost too young for society—watching them from the opposite side, finds her mind much exercised, and wonders in her heart if Mrs. Leyton is *really* very fond of papa. Surely she *must* be; else why

does she raise her large, soft, dark eyes so tenderly to his once in every three minutes precisely by the marble clock on the chimney-piece?

Aunt Isabel, at the head of the table, is radiant as usual, and dispenses roast turkey and smiles with equal alacrity. She is carving with even more than her customary vigor and well-known proficiency, while at the same time she is listening to and adding a word here and there to every topic under discussion. She is, however, particularly attentive to Miss Lobin, who sits beside her, and who is as deaf as a post, though no trouble to any one except herself, poor lady, as she seeks not for conversation, and, as long as she gets a bit of everything mentioned in the *menu*, is perfectly content.

There are two or three stray men from the neighboring barracks scattered up and down; and these, with the three Misses Brighton,—who, being evidently not cut out by mother Nature for the civil service, have been considered suitable to ask to meet them,—make up the party.

"Well, Cis, you had a pleasant day, I hope?" says Uncle Charlie, presently addressing his favorite niece.

"A delicious day, dear uncle; only we wound up with a misfortune. I was stupid enough to hurt Captain Halkett's horse on my way home through the

Park; though indeed I scarcely think it was my fault. However, as it *was* to happen, we were lucky in having it occur at the end instead of the beginning of our day, as we had our ride in spite of it."

As she makes this little speech, she never once glances at Halkett (indeed, she has taken no notice of him since the commencement of dinner), and purposely treats the whole thing as unworthy of regret. Halkett, contrasting her pretty contrition of the morning with this off-hand dismissal of the matter, is, manlike, thoroughly mystified.

"I am sorry to hear of an accident," says Uncle Charlie, who holds all good animals dear to his heart. "Nothing serious, I hope, Frank?"

"A mere scratch," returns Halkett, carelessly.

"That is right. It could not have happened through any great desire on the rider's part to reach her home, as she delayed her return so long we all imagined an elopement had taken place. But there was no such excitement in store for us. I do think, as your guardian and uncle, Cis, I have every right to know what you and the major were talking of all that time."

"Politics," says the major, lightly, "we never talk anything but politics, do we, Miss Mordaunt?"

Here Blake dodges to one side of the épergne, that

he may the more surely get a full view of Miss Mordaunt's face.

"*Never*," replies Cissy, emphatically, dodging the épergne in her turn; and then they both laugh.

Here Halkett mutters something under his breath that is so far audible as to rouse the silly young lady by his side into some kind of life. She sighs and uplifts her head.

"Were you speaking to me?" she asks, in a somewhat startled tone.

"No — yes — was I?" stammers Halkett, rather shocked. "I *ought* to have been, of course; but I have fallen so low as to allow dinner to engross all my attention. Pray forgive me. It comes entirely of going down to dinner with a middle-aged gourmet."

"Dear me! I fancied you quite young," responds his companion, with a simper, and lapses again into silence after the effort.

"Politics!" says Uncle Charlie, going back to the subject, after he has desired the butler to take several different dishes to Miss Lobin. "How you must have enjoyed yourself!—especially Cissy. I never met any woman with such keen and comprehensive views on all matters connected with the State. It was only yesterday I asked her opinion of Gladstone, and she told me she always thought he was—"

"*Now*, Uncle Charlie!" interrupts Miss Mordaunt, with such indignation that the old gentleman, though chuckling to himself audibly, refuses all further information.

"May we not hear your opinion of Gladstone?" demands Sir Thomas, who is an old beau, and much addicted to Miss Mordaunt.

"Certainly not. And, remember, I distinctly forbid you to ask Uncle Charlie any questions when my back is turned, as he is capable of saying *anything* once my eye is off him."

"Your will is my law," says the old beau, with a bow that would have reflected credit on a Chesterfield; and shortly afterwards, at a signal from Aunt Isabel, the ladies, rising, leave the gentlemen to their own devices.

On entering the drawing-room, Mrs. Leyton, walking with the undulating graceful motion that belongs to her, and that cannot be acquired, goes straight to the fire-place, where she sinks into a lounging-chair, leaving the opposite one for Aunt Isabel, who almost instantly falls into a gentle doze. Little Miss Millar, the vicar's daughter, losing sight of her shyness in her desire to obtain her object, seeks a resting-place that will enable her still to keep a fascinated watch over Mrs. Leyton, the widow having cast a glamour

over the timid country maiden. The Misses Brighton and Grace Elton keep up a continual chatter, and are evidently enjoying themselves immensely; while Miss Lobin, taking the cosey corner of the sofa, emulates her hostess, and, letting her face lengthen until it reaches a state of utter imbecility, sweetly snoozes.

Cissy is standing in one of the windows, somewhat apart: she gazes out upon the stilly night, and softly cogitates. She cannot quite make up her mind whether she has been most sinned against or sinning; she cannot wholly approve her conduct at dinner, and finds it impossible to divest herself entirely of the idea that Halkett was looking miserable the entire time. But all men make a point of appearing injured when placed in the wrong position, and of course he had not liked her cross-examination of the morning. Yet, again, why should he *not* receive presents from women? What right had she to question act or word of his? No matter what thoughts and hopes she may have encouraged in the secret recesses of her heart, she feels now she has no certain data to go upon to prove that Halkett cares for her beyond all others. Somebody—who was it?—had said he was a flirt. Well, one thing was positive: he should not flirt with *her*.

Here Aunt Isabel, slowly rousing, sneezes and

a-hems audibly, to let her friends know she has not been sleeping.

"Cissy, child," she says, you will be perished over there. Come to the fire and warm yourself."

"I am warm, thank you, and quite comfortable."

"My love, I don't believe it"—with extreme mildness; "it is freezing as hard as it can, and there is always a draught near a window. Come here when I desire you."

"Oh, I shall die near that blazing log."

"And *I* shall die if you remain over there," says Aunt Isabel; and carries her point.

"Better I than you, auntie," says Cissy, and, coming over good-humoredly, kneels down beside her kinswoman.

"Cold hands—warm heart," murmurs the old lady, caressing the soft white fingers that lie upon her lap.

"A troublesome possession," remarks Mrs. Leyton, with a lazy smile. "No one is *really* happy in this world except he or she who carries an empty bosom."

"Are *you* happy?" asks Miss Cissy, innocently.

"Almost. The little worn-out article that beats here"—laying her hand over the region of the heart—"has pulsations hardly strong enough to cause me any uneasiness. Now and then I feel a faint pang; not often."

"I would rather keep my heart, even at the expense of my suffering," says Cissy, warmly. "She who cannot feel anguish can know no perfect joy. Without love, life is a mistake, an unutterably stupid gift. That is how *I* think; but then I am Irish, and therefore of course unreasonable."

"Oh, no!" says Mrs. Leyton, graciously. "The Irish are the most charming people in the world—so light-hearted, so quick to sympathize. Though I have been here only two days, and have asked no questions, I knew you to be Irish before you told me. Most of my friends come from your land: even Captain Halkett is half-Irish, his mother being from Galway."

"Yes?" says Cissy. She rather shrinks from mention of Halkett's name, and remembers with a slight pang how friendly have seemed his relations with Mrs. Leyton since her arrival. "Have you known Captain Halkett long?" she cannot help asking.

"All my life. His father and mine were fast friends; our childhood was spent together. Then we separated"—with a sigh, that sounds ominous to Cissy, but in reality is only born of past sorrow, utterly unconnected with him in any way—"to meet again after many years in India, and now—here. One way or another, all through, Frank's life has been mixed up with mine."

Cissy bites her lip, and asks no more questions, but Mrs. Leyton notices the action of the white teeth, and ponders.

"There is a great charm in Frank's manner, I think?" she says, interrogatively.

"Is there? Most men nowadays are charming, as acquaintances," replied Cissy, carelessly. "And Captain Halkett is too universal a favorite to be altogether charming to *one*."

"Poor Frank!" laughs the widow, lightly. "He is unfortunate, or at least has found some one who can not appreciate him. Then you mean to say you would find it impossible to care for any man who liked some other woman beside yourself?"

"Well, as you ask me the question, I confess I would," says Cissy, who is feeling irritated, she scarcely knows why. "I would divide honors with no one, and I would be winner—or nothing."

"Then the man you love must be civil to no one else?"—with arched eyebrows indicative of surprise.

"Oh, '*civil!*' Let him be as civil as he pleases. If you were talking merely of civility, I altogether misunderstood you. I only meant if I had a lover—which at the present moment I certainly have not—I would wish to be first in his eyes. Let him be *civil* to all the world, but let him love *me*."

"Quite so; that is only fair, I think," says the widow, but she looks immensely amused; and Cissy, seeing her expression, feels her wrath rising. "I quite thought—judging from appearances—that you and Captain Halkett were very good friends," goes on Mrs. Leyton, unwisely, and regrets her speech a moment later.

"I beg you will not judge *me* from appearances," says Miss Mordaunt, haughtily. "A woman of the world as you are, Mrs. Leyton, ought surely to know that people for the most part do not feel everything they may look. And, besides, you must forgive me, but if there is one thing I have a particular objection to, it is being watched and commented upon."

"You are right," returns Mrs. Leyton, with suspicious sweetness. "I fear I have been very indiscreet. For the future I will not *watch* you and Captain Halkett."

There is a covert meaning in this speech that is absolutely maddening; but the entrance of the gentlemen puts a stop to Miss Mordaunt's reply. She withdraws slowly, and seats herself upon a distant lounge, where she is immediately joined by Major Blake.

"I hope you have missed me," he says, with a tender glance, pushing aside her trailing skirts that he may gain room for his huge person. "I assure you

the time those men spent over their wine was actionable,—while I was tantalized by dreams of fair women the entire two hours."

"Two hours! What an exaggeration. Why, by Aunt Isabel's watch, that was never known to lose a minute, it was only half an hour."

"What to me was two hours, to you was but a fourth of the time. How cruel an interpretation may be put upon your words! And I have been buoying myself up with the hope, while absent from you, that when we *did* meet again I should hear something kind from your lips."

"And so you shall," says Miss Mordaunt, bestowing upon him a radiant smile, just to let "that woman" see she is not pining for the recreant Frank. But, unfortunately for the success of the thing, Mrs. Leyton is looking the other way, and does not see it at all, while Frank Halkett does.

"Must I confess to you? Well, then, my accurate knowledge of the hour arose from my incessant glances at the watch, to see if your delay in coming was really as long as it appeared—to *me*."

"If I thought you *meant* that," begins Blake hesitatingly, with a sudden gleam in his eyes (what man but feels more valiant after dinner than before?)—"if I really thought you meant it—"

"Well, 'if you really thought I meant it,' what would you do? But no!" she cries, hastily, seeing she had gone rather far, and unwilling to bring matters to a climax: "do not tell me; I do not wish to know. My ignorance in this case no doubt is blissful; I prefer to remain in it. And now to change the subject. Who is Mrs. Leyton? and what do you know about her? I am all curiosity where she is concerned."

"Do you like her?" asks Blake, merely as a precautionary measure.

"I can't say I do, exactly," replies the Irish girl, candidly. "Now tell me where you first met her."

"In India. Her husband was alive when I first became acquainted with her. He lived tremendously hard; but he was devoted to her, without doubt, and she to him, and she took his death awfully badly. Never saw a woman so cut up by anything before; they generally take it pretty sensibly after the first shock, but she didn't, and went to a skeleton in less than three months."

"She is not very thin now."

"No. I suppose one can't keep on pining forever, and in course of time good food *will* cover one's bones. But she felt it no end for months, and was altogether down in her luck. You see, he got rather

a horrible death, as his horse first threw him, and then almost trampled him beyond recognition"

"How dreadful!" murmurs Miss Mordaunt, with a little shiver, and wonders how Mrs. Leyton could ever have smiled afterwards.

"Yes; wasn't it? She took it so much to heart that for years after she could not bear the sight of a horse, thought she had the best seat in the regiment —among the women, I mean—and could not be induced to take a ride. Before leaving India, she sold, or gave away, every one of her horses."

Here Cissy becomes intensely interested. "To whom did she give them?" she asks, indifferently.

"I hardly know,—I was up-country at the time,—but to her most intimate friends, I suppose. By the bye, Halkett was an immense crony of hers."

"Indeed?"

"Never out of the house," says the major, thinking it a good opportunity to improve his own chances, though really only giving voice to what had been the common report in that part of India where the catastrophe had occurred. "After Tom Leyton's death, he would have married her like a shot; but she would not hear of it. She is a very handsome woman, you know, and tremendously admired by some fellows, though for my part I don't altogether see it."

"Don't you? I think her wonderfully pretty. Perhaps she will relent and marry him now; who knows? Certainly his constancy deserves some reward. Was it Mrs. Leyton gave him the mare?"

"Don't know, I'm sure, but think it very likely, now you mention it, as he sets such uncommon store by her. How very well Mrs. Leyton is looking just now!" says the major, adjusting his eye-glass with much care, and glancing significantly at the other end of the room, where sits the widow in earnest conversation with Frank Halkett. Cissy follows the direction of his gaze, but, conscious of his scrutiny, takes care that not one muscle of her face betrays what she is really feeling.

Yes, very well, very *handsome*, looks Mrs. Leyton, as, leaning gracefully back in her chair, with onehand toying idly with the rings that cover her fingers, she listens to Captain Halkett's conversation. Now and then she raises large dreamy eyes—half mirthful, half sympathetic—to his face, but scarcely interrupts him. He is talking with much earnestness, is apparently entirely engrossed by his subject, and takes no heed of what is going on around him. Presently he ceases, and evidently seeks an answer from his beautiful companion. She gives him one of her upward glances—all sympathy this time—and says a few words; but

they are without doubt the right ones, as Halkett's face brightens, and a smile overspreads it that makes it positively handsome. At the moment he raises her hand, and bending over it seems to examine her rings curiously. To Cissy the action almost bespeaks a betrothal, and renders her half indignant, wholly miserable. Nevertheless, turning to Major Blake, she says, with a bright, brave smile, "I think my idea was right, and even now he has received his reward."

"Looks uncommon like it," says the major, with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER II.

HAD Cissy only known it, there was very little in Frank Halkett's words to cause her any uneasiness. On his entering the drawing-room, seeing his place by Cissy's side forestalled by the major, whose person intercepted the beaming smile of welcome she bestowed upon him, he had turned away and thrown himself into the low chair that stood by Mrs. Leyton's cosey lounge.

"So you have taken refuge with me?" says that lady, with a quiet smile.

"Refuge!" repeats Halkett, with an innocently puzzled air. "No; I have only taken a seat."

"What's the matter with you, Frank?"

"Nothing. Why? Do I look dyspeptic?"

"You don't look pleasant, certainly, if that has anything to do with it. Come; I am a witch, you know," says Mrs. Leyton, "and so can tell all your secrets. And, just to prove my power, I will tell you something now: you are sulky this evening."

"Meaning I am stupid, I suppose," says Halkett; "but it don't take much witchery to discover that. I have an awful headache."

"Oh, but I have not half done yet. Shall I go on? I could tell something very important, but that I am afraid of your heavy displeasure. Will you promise not to be angry?"

"Angry with *you!* Was I ever that?" asks Halkett, tenderly. "I give you full liberty to say anything on earth you like to me."

"Do you mean that?"

"Certainly I mean it."

"Very good, then," says the widow, with lazy triumph; I will continue my sorceries. And, first, you are in love."

"'In love!'" reiterates Halkett, forcing himself heroically to meet her laughing eyes, and reddening

very much in the attempt. "No, no; your witchcraft has played you false this time."

"It has not. I persist in my declaration. You are in love — hopelessly, irretrievably, desperately in love."

"Well, perhaps I am," says Frank, with tranquil resignation. "Is that strange? Could one be with you, Frances, for so long a time, and not—"

"Nonsense!" interrupts Mrs. Leyton. "Do not trouble yourself to complete that sentence. We are much too old friends for *that*, I take it. And now, Frank, be a good boy; emulate your name, tell me all about it."

"I really don't know that there is anything much to tell," says Halkett, smiling. "But what there is you shall hear. I admire a certain youg lady more than is good for me; I fancy, until to-day, she returns my regard. I discover a couple of hours ago that my vanity has misled me. I see her happy in the arms—no, in the society of another; I find myself nowhere. Hence my dyspepsia, distraction, and despair. Don't look so sympathetic, Frances: probably I shall get over it."

Though he says this with a laughing face, Mrs. Leyton's dark eyes can see for themselves he is tremendously hard hit.

"And what is her name?" she asks, sweetly.

"Oh, Frances! You laying claim to be a witch and must even ask *that* question? I decline to answer it. Your fairy-lore should enable you to find out that much for yourself."

"I love my love with a C because she is candid; I hate her with a C because she is capricious," says Mrs. Leyton, archly. "Am I 'warm?' or will you still cry 'cold?' If you do the latter, I doubt you will be wronging your conscience. Ah, Frank, I think I am one too many for you!"

"You were always that. What one man is equal to any woman? Well, as you have guessed so far, I believe I may as well tell you the rest." And forthwith he commences to pour forth a tale, the telling of which had caused Cissy such exquisite anguish.

When he has finished, Mrs. Leyton says, "If you will take my advice, you will seek the first opportunity that offers, and ask for an explanation of her coldness."

"You really think that the best thing to do?" says Halkett, brightening. "I will act upon your advice, then, and try my chance. Now let us forget it for the present. Is that a new ring upon your finger? May I look at it? Does it mark a fresh adorer?

"No; an old one. Geoffrey Hyde gave it to me

last autumn." She surrenders her hand to him as she speaks; and he, bending over it, examines leisurely the cluster of brilliants that scintillate and flash beneath the lamp-light.

"He has been faithful to you for a long time," says Halkett, presently.

"Yes; he is very tormenting. I really believe I shall have to marry him in the long run, if only to get him out of the way." She reddens a little as she says this, and laughs rather nervously.

"Are you serious?" asks Halkett, with surprise. "Then you are going to make him a happy man, after all?"

"That remains to be proved. Probably I shall make him a wholesome warning to all obstinate men. But I think when last I saw him I made him some foolish promise about marrying him in the spring."

"I congratulate him with all my heart, and you too," says Halkett, cordially. "I think he is the only man I know *quite* worthy of you."

When the hour comes for bedroom candles to be adjusted, Halkett seizes one, lights it, and carries it solemnly to Miss Mordaunt. But, quick as he has been, Major Blake reaches her side similarly armed, almost at the same moment.

"Which shall I take?" says Miss Cissy, gayly. "I

suppose I can have my choice. I think *this* pleases me most;" and she holds out her hand towards Blake with a pretty smile. "Thank you," she continues, slipping her slender fingers into his brown palm; "and good-night. Don't smoke too much." And with a little provoking backward nod she trips away, without bestowing so much as one poor glance upon Halkett. And so ends his first attempt at an explanation, leaving him so indignant that he almost vows he will not seek another.

All the following day Miss Mordaunt studiously avoids him, giving him no chance of obtaining the *tête-à-tête* she sees is impending. But Halkett calmly bides his time, knowing it cannot be far distant. As daylight fades, he feels more than ever determined to bring her to book before the dawn of another morning; and in this instance at least the Fates favor him, as there is to be a large dancing-party at the Hall to-night. She cannot well refuse to give him one dance out of the many; such palpable avoidance would be rather *too* marked; and once he has secured her as his partner, she must be at his mercy until the dance comes to an end.

This idea, of course, has also occurred to Miss Mordaunt, and, though dreading the interview, she is still sufficiently indignant to cause her to make up her

mind to be as curt and outspoken on the occasion as will be in strict keeping with her dignity. In this frame of mind she goes up-stairs to dress, and, being an Irishwoman, it cannot be altogether said but that she sustains a rather pleasurable sensation—albeit one largely mingled with something very much akin to nervousness—as the battle-hour draws nigh.

"What shall I wear, Kennedy?" she asks her maid, sinking languidly into a chair.

"Well, miss, you know you look well in anything," says Kennedy, obligingly; "there is nothing but what becomes you; but, if I might be allowed to suggest, you look lovely entirely in white."

"I won't wear white; I hate it," says her mistress, pettishly. "*Débutantes*, and brides, and corpses wear white: I think—I shall wear—*black* to-night."

"Black? Oh, Miss Mordaunt!"

"Yes; certainly. Is gay clothing so necessary to me, then?"

"Well, miss, there's no doubt but you look real handsome in black; but the other ladies—they will be so gay—and you—"

"I shall be gayer than any of them, and the greater contrast!" cries Cissy, springing to her feet. "Come, Kennedy; despatch; despatch; I feel I shall hold my own yet."

And Kennedy, throwing herself heart and mind into her task, soons turns out the most charming picture possible.

As Miss Mordaunt enters the drawing-room, she sees Halkett standing on the hearth-rug in earnest conversation with the widow, who, if there is a fire anywhere, is never any great distance from it. He has been telling her of his repulse of the night before, and is looking somewhat dejected.

"Never mind," says Mrs. Leyton, kindly; "get her *alone;* then *you* will have the advantage. I think she must have heard—or fancied—something that wounds her."

"I do not flatter myself so far; I merely think she prefers Blake, and wishes to get rid of me," says Halkett, gloomily.

"Nonsense! Let nothing induce you to believe that. In the first place, she doesn't even *look* at the man in the right way."

Halkett laughs in spite of himself, and immediately afterwards becomes, if possible, even more despondent than before.

"How can she like that fellow Blake?" he says, ill-naturedly.

"Oh, I don't see *that.* For my part, I think him absolutely handsome."

"Of course; that goes without telling. All women have a *tendresse* for those great coarse broad-shouldered men. And what an accent he has!"

"Do you really dislike it? To me, I confess, it is rather pleasant—mellow, with just a touch of the brogue. Your Cissy, you must remember, has it too, with perhaps rather more of the mellow and less of the brogue; but then you are prejudiced against this poor Blake."

"Indeed I am not; you mistake me altogether: I think him a downright good fellow. In fact, I have a fancy for all Irishmen; they are so full of go—chic—good humor, *until crossed.* And Blake is like all his countrymen, a most enjoyable companion," says Halkett, with suspicious warmth.

"Evidently Miss Mordaunt is of your opinion," says the widow, rather cruelly, pointing to where Cissy is listening with a smiling face to one of the major's good stories.

Meanwhile, the guests are arriving; and the fine old room that has been given up to the dancers is rapidly filling with pretty girls and powdered dowagers and men of all ages and degrees. Papas too are numerous; but these instinctively crowd round Uncle Charlie, and by degrees edge towards a more dimly-lighted room, where instinct tells them whist is holding silent sway.

"Will you give me the first dance?" says Halkett to Mrs. Leyton, who readily grants her consent. Major Blake has, of course, secured Cissy; and presently, as ill luck will have it, they find themselves in the same set, dancing opposite to each other. As Halkett's hand meets Cissy's, he hardly lets his fingers close round hers; and, as she is also in a revengeful mood, the ladies' chain almost falls to the ground. Mrs. Leyton, in spite of the good nature that lies somewhere in her composition, nearly chokes with suppressed laughter as she witnesses this little by-play. She twits Halkett about it later on, but he is moody, and doesn't take kindly to her witticisms.

At least half the programme has been gone through before Captain Halkett asks Miss Mordaunt for a dance.

"If I am disengaged," she says, coldly, not looking at him, and searches her card with a languid bored air that tantalizes him almost beyond endurance. He is longing to say, "Never mind it; I won't interfere with your enjoyment this time," with his sweetest smile, and rage at his heart; but he is too sternly determined to have it out with her to-night, to let his natural feelings win the day.

Cissy, examining her card, finds she is not engaged for the next dance, very much to her disgust, and is

pondering whether she shall tell the lie direct and declare she is, when Halkett, as though he divines her thoughts, says abruptly, "Not engaged for the next? Then I suppose I may have it?"

"I suppose so," returns Miss Cissy, reluctantly, and, instantly turning from him, addresses her partner, as though such a person as Halkett were no longer in existence. Indeed, when after a quarter of an hour he finds her in the conservatory and claims the fulfilment of her promise, it is with the utmost bad grace she places the very tips of her fingers upon his arm and looks impatiently towards the ball-room.

"I don't mean dancing just yet; I have something particular to say to you first," says Halkett, hastily, and almost commandingly, standing quite still. "It is hardly private here. Would you find it too cold to come with me into the garden?" glancing at the open door of the conservatory.

Cissy hesitates; then, fearful of seeming reluctant, says, "No. If you will go the library for my shawl (you will find it on the sofa), I will go with you."

"You will stay here until I return?" says Halkett, regarding her intently.

Cissy stares in turn. "Of course I will," she answers, rather haughtily; and he goes.

"Did he imagine I would run away when his back

was turned?" she soliloquizes, angrily. "Does he suppose I am *afraid?* One would think it was *I* was in the wrong, not he. His conduct altogether is downright mysterious. I cannot understand him." And for the first time it dawns upon her that there may possibly be some flaw in the interpretation she has put upon his conduct.

Returning with the shawl, Halkett places it gently round her shoulders, and they pass into the quiet night.

"What a beautiful moon!" exclaims Cissy, presently, hardly knowing what to say.

"Yes,"—absently.

"And, for this time of year, how wonderfully mild it is! Not in the least cold, as one might expect."

"Yes—no—is it not?"

"I really don't know what *you* think about it," says Miss Mordaunt, impatiently. "I, for my part, find it almost warm; but of course I cannot answer for you. Probably all this time you are feeling desperately cold."

This little petulant outburst rouses Halkett.

"No!" he says, with sudden energy and warmth, "I am *not.* It is not in my nature to be cold in any way. I feel most things keenly—more especially slights from those I love. All ill-concealed disdain, unkind speeches, fickleness, touch me closely."

"I can sympathize with you," says Cissy, calmly. "I think nothing can be so bad as inconstancy—except perhaps deceit."

This retort, being as unexpected as it is evidently *meant*, puzzles Halkett to such a degree that he becomes absolutely silent. Miss Mordaunt, with her white shawl drawn closely round her slight, black-robed figure, walks quietly beside him with the air of an offended queen, her head held rather higher than usual, a pretty look of scorn upon her lips.

After a while Halkett pulls up abruptly and faces her in the narrow pathway. "What is the reason of your changed behavior towards me to-day and yesterday?" he says, shortly. "I think I have a right to ask that."

"*Have* I changed?"

"*Have* you? Must you ask the question? The whole world can see it. You treat me with the most studied coldness."

"I thought I was treating you with as much courtesy as I give to all my uncle's guests."

"I don't care for courtesy," says Halkett, passionately: "your hatred would be better than your indifference. Yesterday morning I believed we were friends, —nay, *more* than that; yesterday evening you ignored me altogether. It is either heartless coquetry on your

part or else you have a reason for your conduct. Let me hear it."

"You are forgetting yourself," says Miss Mordaunt, coldly. "You are the first person who has ever accused me of coquetry; you shall not do it again. I was foolish to come here with you, but I trusted you. I wish to return to the house."

"Nay, hear me!" cries Halkett, remorsefully, following as she makes a movement to leave him, and catching her hand to detain her. "Your avoidance has so perplexed and maddened me that I said more than I meant or intended. Forgive me, and at least let me know how I have offended. Cissy, answer me!"

For a moment Miss Mordaunt hesitates; then, endeavoring to speak lightly, "I did not intend to perplex you," she says: "one cannot speak to every one at the same time. I am sorry if I appeared rude or neglectful; but you did not *look* very miserable, and surely Mrs. Leyton was an excellent substitute for me." She smiles as she says this, but pales a little too beneath the brilliant moon that is betraying her.

"Mrs. Leyton is my very oldest and dearest friend," replies Halkett; "but no one on earth could console me for—your loss. Why will you not confess the truth, Cissy, and—"

"Yet you once loved her, if report speaks truly,"

interrupts Miss Mordaunt, still speaking carelessly, though her heart-throbs can almost be counted. "In India, we hear, there was a time when you would gladly have called her your wife. Is it not so?"

Halkett drops her hand.

"Has that miserable bit of gossip taken root even here?" he says, with a faint sneer. "Has Blake been making his cause good by such rubbishing tales? Frances Leyton and I grew up together. I would as soon think of making love to my nearest of kin as to her. The idea of any romantic attachment existing between us is more than absurd! Besides, she is to be married to Geoffrey Hyde early in the coming spring."

Miss Mordannt severs a little twig from one of the shrubs, and takes it to pieces slowly.

"Then *she* did not give you your favorite mare?" she says, quietly detesting herself as she asks the question, yet feeling compelled to solve all her doubts at once.

"No; she did not." A pause. "Shall I tell you who gave her to me? It was my only sister, Lady Harley. She loved the Baby dearly, and on her death-bed told me to take good care of the creature, for her sake."

The twig falls from Cissy's fingers. Surely, surely it cannot be true! Oh, how he must hate and despise

her for all she has said and done. It is too late to make reparation. She feels she would rather die a thousand deaths than give in and confess to all the wretched suspicions and jealousies she has been carefully harboring in her heart during these two past days.

"However, all this is beside the question," goes on Halkett: "you have not yet told me what I so much want to know. Has Blake anything to do with your coldness to me? Tell me, Cissy,—are you engaged to him?"

Cissy has not expected this, and, growing suddenly crimson, lets her head droop somewhat suspiciously. Halkett's eyes are on her face.

"No; of course not: I am not, indeed." There is a faint stammer in her speech as she says this, and Halkett's fears become certainties.

"But you *care* for him!" he exclaims, vehemently. "The very mention of his name has brought a flush into your cheeks. You hesitate, and turn your head aside. This, then, accounts for your sudden change of behavior towards me! Having gained your point, you found your first victim in the way, and, hardly knowing how to get rid of so troublesome an appendage, had recourse to— Had you told me point-blank my attentions were unwelcome, it would have been more womanly, more just—"

"Pray do not say another word," says Miss Mordaunt, with dignity, though tears are in her voice and eyes: "this is the second time to-night you have spoken words difficult to forget. Do not trouble yourself to return with me. I prefer going in alone."

. . . . . .

When Cissy and Halkett appear at breakfast the following morning they take care to seat themselves as far as possible from each other, and presently it becomes palpable to every one that they are considerably out of sorts. Uncle Charlie suggests that Miss Cissy has over-danced herself, or given the wrong man his *congé*—a remark that has sufficient truth in it to bring the hot blood into her cheeks; while Captain Halkett, having run through his letters, declares he must return to town by the afternoon train; at which Mrs. Leyton looks uneasy and casts a covert glance at Cissy Mordaunt.

That young lady stands fire pretty well, but with all her hardihood cannot keep her under lip from trembling ever so little. This sign of weakness, be assured, does not escape the widow's tutored eye; and she instantly challenges Major Blake to a game of billiards after breakfast.

"My dear Frank, you can't go to-day," says Uncle Charlie, decidedly. "To-morrow they have promised

us the best run we have had yet. I will not hear of your leaving. Write and tell her you have sprained your ankle, and send her your undying love. She will forgive you when she sees you."

"I wish I *could* stay," says Halkett, laughing, "but unfortunately my recall is from my solicitor, not from my lady-love."

"I don't believe a word of it!" says Uncle Charlie. "A sudden recall *always* means a woman. Why, when *I* was a young man, I thought nothing of—"

"My dear!" says Aunt Isabel, with a gentle uplifting of the right hand.

"Quite so, my good Belle," returns Uncle Charlie, patting the soft white fingers. "But seriously, Frank, she will do very well without you."

"I have no doubt of *that*," says Halkett, and, raising his eyes, meets Miss Mordaunt's full.

Half an hour later, Cissy, feeling mournful and guilty, steals round to the stables to take a last look at the Baby, as she is afraid to look at the Baby's master. Just as she is patting her and rubbing down the soft velvet muzzle, the door opens, and Halkett enters.

"I am glad to see she is so much better," says Miss Mordaunt, promptly but nervously, pointing to the injured limb. "If you go to-day, you will not take her with you, I suppose?"

"No; I suppose not."

"*Must* you go?"

Halkett glances at her reproachfully. "Yes; of course I must. There is no other course left open to me. After what you told me last night, it would be simple madness to remain."

"What did I tell you? I don't think I told you anything."

"Well, what you led me to infer."

"You should not infer things. I never meant you to do so." As Miss Mordaunt says this in a very low tone, she turns her head aside an recedes a step or two. A dark flush rises to Halkett's brow, coloring all his face, even through the bronze and Indian sun has laid upon it. A sudden gleam of something akin to hope shines in his eyes for an instant, but is as speedily suppressed.

"Do you know what you are doing?" he says, in a tone sufficiently unsteady to betray the agitation he is feeling. "Do you know what your manner, your words, seem to me to mean? Do not, I implore you, raise within me again the hope I have surrendered, unless—Oh, Cissy, *you* will never know how cruel a thing it is to love without return!"

"But—are you sure—*your* love—has gained no return?" demands Miss Cissy, in faltering accents, and

immediately afterwards feels she has but one desire on earth, and that is for the ground to open and swallow her up.

"Cissy, Cissy!" cries Halkett, "*tell* me you do not care for that fellow Blake!"

"Not a bit, not a bit!" says Cissy, and in another moment finds herself in Halkett's arms, her tears running riot over the breast of his coat. "Oh, say that you forgive me!" she sobs. "It was most hateful of me—about that bedroom candlestick the other night, and everything. But I misunderstood it all. I thought you loved Mrs. Leyton. *Say* that you forgive me!"

"I will not hear a word about forgiveness now," says Halkett, who has been assiduously employed in kissing her hair, brow, and any other part of her face that is visible. "It is taking a mean advantage of me; I am so happy this moment, I would forgive my bitterest enemy without hesitation. By and by we will discuss the question, and I shall grant you pardon on my own terms."

Some time before luncheon there comes a knock, low but decided, at Uncle Charlie's library door.

"Come in!" calls out the owner of the apartment; and the door opening admits Frank Halkett and Miss Mordaunt,—the latter keeping well behind, and only

compelled by the strong clasp of her companion's hand to advance at all.

"I have come, sir," says Halkett, mildly, "to tell you I have, after all, decided on delaying my departure until next week, as I at first intended—if you do not object."

"Indeed, indeed! I am glad of that," says Uncle Charlie, just a wee bit puzzled. "I need not say how welcome you are. But what about the business letter, eh, and your hot haste to reach town? What has changed your plans, eh?"

"Miss Mordaunt," says Halkett, with a mischievous glance at Cissy, who is hopelessly confused and horribly shamefaced, in the background. "Miss Mordaunt has induced me to alter my mind."

"Eh? what, what?" says Uncle Charlie, rising from his chair as the truth dawns upon him, and instantly sinking back into it again. "You don't mean it! And all this time I could have *sworn* it was that fellow Blake!"

PORTIA;

OR

By Passions Rocked

BY

THE DUCHESS

AUTHOR OF "PHYLLIS," "AIRY, FAIRY LILLIAN" ETC.

NEW YORK
JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY
150 WORTH STREET, CORNER MISSION PLACE

PORTIA;

Or, "By Passions Rocked."

CHAPTER I.

"A child of our grandmother Eve, a female; or, for thy more sweet understanding, a woman." —LOVE'S LABORS LOST.

THE gates are thrown wide open, and the carriage rolls smoothly down the long dark avenue, beneath the waving branches of the tall elms and the copper beeches, through which the dying sun is flinging its parting rays.

The horses, sniffing the air of home, fling up their heads and make still greater haste, until presently, rounding the curve, they draw up before the hall door.

It stands open, and on the high, stone steps that lead to it, a very pretty girl looks down upon the carriage from under her palm, with a face eager and expectant. When she has barely glanced at it, she says, "Ah!" in a tone of deep satisfaction, and running down the steps and over the gravel, turns the handle of the carriage door and looks anxiously at its occupant.

"You have come," she says, cheerily. "I was *so* afraid something might have prevented you."

The person she addresses—a girl about two years older than herself, says:

"Yes, I have come." in a tone slow and sweet, almost to languor.

"*So* glad," says the pretty girl, with a smile that must be one

of her sweetest charms, it is so full of life and gaiety; "come out of this dreadful old sarcophagus and upstairs with me; I have your tea in your own room for you."

Miss Vibart, stepping out of the brougham, follows her hostess into the house, through the grand old hall, and up the wide, oak staircase, into a room huge and old-fashioned—but delicious and cozy, and comfortable to the last degree.

Having cast one hasty glance round the apartment, Miss Vibart turns to her young hostess—

"You are Dulcinea? isn't it?" she says, questioningly.

"Yes, I am Dulcinea as a rule—(may I be your maid, just for once—you will be so much happier without your hat)—but I have so many other names, that it takes me all my time to remember which one I really belong to. Uncle Christopher calls me Baby! and Mark Gore, when he is here, calls me Duchess, and Dicky Browne calls me Tom, and Roger calls me—I really quite forget what it is Roger calls me," with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Is Dicky Browne your *fiance?*" asks Miss Vibart, uncertainly; "I know you are engaged to somebody; Auntie Maud told me that."

"Dicky Browne! Oh, no!" Then, with the gayest little laugh in the world, "If you could only *see* Dicky Browne! He couldn't, by any possibility, be *anybody's fiancé!* You mean Roger, I suppose." But, with a quick frown and a touch of petulance, "Don't let us talk about *him.* He is such a worry, and has been making himself so exceedingly unpleasant all the morning!"

Miss Vibart stares, forgetting her usually very charming manners for the moment, and then drops her heavily-fringed lids over her eyes.

"By-the-by," says Dulce, breaking in upon what threatens to be an awkward pause, "how d'ye do? I don't believe I have said that yet." Her whole tone and expression have changed as if by magic; the suggestion of ill-temper is gone; the former vivacity re-asserts itself. She lays her hands upon her visitor's shoulders with a light, caressing gesture, and leans towards her. "I shall give you a little kiss for your welcome, my dear cousin, if I may," she says, very prettily.

Portia Vibart, acknowledging her grace, tells herself this

new cousin will suit very well, and returns her soft embrace with some warmth. She is feeling tired, used up, *ennuye* to the last degree; even the two or three weeks she has had in town have been too much for her, and she has come down to her uncle's house nearly ready to confess to herself that she is seriously ill. Here, in the stillness, in this great room, with the elms swaying to and fro outside her windows, and the distant cawing of the rooks in the branches high up out of sight, she feels rest, and comfort, and a curious longing, that has a strange pleasure in it, to stretch out her arms and sigh deeply and contentedly.

"Sit in this chair," and rest a litte before thinking of taking off anything else," says Dulce; "I shall pour out your tea."

She goes, with the quick undulating step that belongs to her, to a small, round table, and makes a little fuss over the delicate fat little cups that stand on the tray.

"You take sugar?" she asks, in a moment or two.

"No, thank you," says Portia, slowly; she is looking at her cousin still, whose hair is as nearly red as it can be, without being exactly so; it comes very, very close to it, but it is only the rude who have ever called it so.

"But of course not," says Dulcinea. "One might know that by looking at you. It isn't a good thing to take sugar in one's tea nowadays, is it?—it almost touches on immorality;" she is standing with the sugar-tongs poised in her right hand, and is glancing at Portia over her shoulder. "*I* take it, you know—any amount of it, and I have yet the grace to be ashamed of myself afresh, at every new lump. Dicky Browne likes it, too."

"Who *is* Dicky Browne?" demands Portia, suddenly: if she is going to live in this rather mixed household, she had better learn some particulars about the inhabitants at once.

"Not know Dicky? it argues yourself unknown. He is our celebrity. He is really immensely clever, about always doing the wrong thing, and indeed is inestimable in most ways. He is your cousin, too, as much as he is mine, which really," declares she airily, "isn't much. But he is such a pet all through that we magnify the third-cousinship into a first. He rides very straight and smokes the very prettiest cigarettes, and he is *such* a fool!"

Miss Vibart is amused. "What a very charming description," she says, with the low laugh she allows herself; "he sounds like something I have seen somewhere, and he certainly would be a treasure to Byron."

"Lord Byron?" asks Dulce, with lifted brows; "I don't myself think he would show off much as a Conrad, or a Giaour, or a Lara."

"I rather fancy I was thinking of the man who writes plays," says Miss Vibart, mildly. "Is he here now?"

"Yes. He spends most of his time here. Both he and Roger are consumed with a desire to see you. You must know," says Dulcinea, laughing over her cups at her cousin, "that a breath from the outer world came to us, whispering of your success in town, and how every one raves of your *beaux yeux*, and your beauty generally."

"Who wafted so insane a breath as that?" asks Portia, with a suppressed smile.

"Mark Gore. He puts in a good deal of his time here, too."

"Mark Gore never talks anything but the very utterest nonsense," says Portia with a faint blush. "No one minds him. I shall be quite afraid to go down-stairs to present myself to Dicky Browne after all you have said. Consider his disappointment."

"I shan't," says Dulce, calmly. "and you needn't fear him. He is only Dicky. Well, it is five now, and we dine at seven. I shall send your maid to you, and I shall call back for you in an hour, if you wish, to bring you down stairs with me. But, perhaps —"

"Oh! please do," says Portia, graciously. "I shall be just a little strange at first, shan't I?"

"Strange here? *Indeed* no," says Dulcinea, earnestly. "Nobody knows the meaning of that word in this old Court. We all get friends with each other at once, and I don't think we ever fall asunder again. Now at six do try to be ready, and I will take you to see Uncle Christopher, who is sure to be in just then."

"I shall be ready," says Portia, with determination.

CHAPTER II.

"The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind is curiosity."—BURKE.

"YES, I am quite ready," says Portia.

The hour has flown, and Dulcinea, standing in the doorway of her cousin's room, gazes on her with undisguised admiration. To Dulcinea, anything lovely, be it man, or beast, or flower, is an intense and everlasting delight, and now Portia enchants her. In very truth so well she might, as a fairer picture than she presents at this moment can hardly be imagined.

She is standing before a large glass, let into the wall on one side of the room from ceiling to floor, and, with a back glass in her hand, is leaning slightly to one side, as though lost in admiration of the soft mass of fair, brown hair that lies coiled low down on her neck in high-art fashion. She is like a soft harmony in black and gold, with her filmy robes clinging closely round her, and the old gold, that is so like tarnished yellow, touching her here and there.

"Ah! Mark was right," says Dulce, with a little sigh of intensest pleasure. "Come down now (you *cannot* make yourself more beautiful), and be made known to Uncle Christopher."

It is in the library that Miss Vibart makes herself known. Dulce entering first, with her gay little air, says:

"This is Portia, Uncle Christopher." Thereupon a tall old man, rising from a chair, comes quickly up to them and takes Portia's hand, and, stooping very low, presses his lips to her forehead.

He is a remarkably handsome old man, with light hair, and a rather warm complexion, and choleric, but kindly eyes. Even at the first glance Portia tells herself he would be as harsh a foe as he would be a champion true, and in so far she reads him right. He is hot-tempered, obstinate, at moments perhaps unjust, but at all times kind-hearted, and deserving of tenderest regard.

Now he is holding his new niece's hand, and is gazing down at her with animated eyes, that no age will ever quite dim.

"So glad. *So* glad you have come to us," he says, in a

tone that reminds her of Dulce's, though it is so deep and strong and masculine, and her's so very much the reverse in every way, "Bless me, how days go by! Just last week, as it seems to me, I saw you a little girl in short petticoats and frills, and furbelows, and now—"

"I wear petticoats still," says Portia, demurely, with a soft laugh, "and frills sometimes, and often furbelows, I *think*, though I don't in the least know what they mean, but they sound nice. So, after all, I should be now very much as I was."

"Very much. But forgive me," says Sir Christopher, "if I say you were not anything like as good-looking then as you are to-day."

"A speech easy to forgive," said Portia, lightly. Then, after a pause, "I, too, remember what *you* were like in those old days."

"What then?" asked Sir Christopher, giving a sudden pull to his collar, and betraying an increased degree of interest.

"Nothing like so good-looking as you are to-day," retorts she, with a quick smile and a little flicker of her eyelids.

"Ah! we shall be friends," cries Sir Christopher, gaily. "Baby and you and I will ride roughshod over all the others; and we have wanted somebody to help us, haven't we, Baby?" Then he turns more entirely to Dulce; "Eh, a sharp wit, isn't it?" he says.

"Auntie Maud sent her love to you," said Portia.

"Eh? Much obliged, I'm sure," says Sir Christopher. "Very good of her; mine to her in return. A most estimable woman she always was, if short of nose. How she *could* have thrown herself away upon that little insignificant—eh?—though he *was* my brother—eh?"

"She ought to have had you," says Miss Vibart, with soft audacity.

"Eh? eh?" says Sir Christopher, plainly delighted. "Now, what a rogue!" He turns to Dulce, as he always does on every occasion, be it sweet or bitter. "You hear her, Dulce. She flatters me, eh?"

"Uncle Christopher, you are a sad, sad flirt," says Dulce, patting his cheek. "I am glad poor Auntie Maud escaped your fascinations. You would have forgotten her in a week. Do you know what o'clock it is?—*after* six. Now do go up

and get ready for dinner, and try to be in time for once, if only to do honor to Portia. He is so irregular," says Dulcinea, turning to Portia.

Miss Vibart, like Alice, begins to think it all "curiouser and curiouser;" yet, withal, the house seems full of love.

"Well, indeed as a rule, I believe I *am* late," says Sir Christopher, in a resigned tone. "But I always put it down upon Mylder; he *can't* tie a cravat!" Then, to Portia, "You are pale and thin, child. You must get rosy and fat, and above all things healthy, before we are done with you."

"She must, indeed," says Dulce, "though I doubt if she will thank us for it by-and-by; when she finds herself (as she shall) with rose-colored cheeks like a dairy-maid, she will be very angry with us all."

"I shall never have red cheeks," says Portia; "and I shall never be angry with you; but I shall surely get strong in this charming air."

"Here you will live forever," says Dulce. "People at ninety-five consider themselves in the prime of life."

"Lucky they!" says Portia; "they must 'wear the rose of youth' upon them forever."

"Oh! we *can* die young," says Dulce, hastily, as though anxious to take a stigma off her country-side. "We have been known to do it, but not much; and the happiest have gone the soonest."

"Yes," says Uncle Christopher, most cheerfully—he is plainly unimpressed, and shows an inclination to whistle

> "Golden lads and girls, all must,
> As chimney-sweepers come to dust!"

"I say, Dulce, isn't Portia like that picture of your grand-aunt in the north gallery?"

"Like who?" asks Portia, anxiously.

"Like the handsomest woman in Europe, of her time," says Sir Christopher, earnestly, with a low, profound bow that might perhaps have been acceptable to "the handsomest woman in Europe," but only serves now to raise wild mirth in the breasts of her degenerate grand-nieces.

When they have reached again the hall outside (leaving Sir Christopher to seek the tender mercies of Mylder) Portia turns to her cousin—

"I am fortunate," she says, in her usual composed fashion

that is yet neither cold nor repellant, "I find Uncle Christopher, also, altogether charming!"

The "also" is very happy. It is not to be misunderstood, and is full of subtle flattery. Dulcinea yields to it, and turns, eyes and lips bright with a warm smile, upon Miss Vibart.

"Yes, he is quite everything that is nice," she says, gracefully ignoring the compliment to herself. "Now, shall we come and sit on the balcony until dinner is ready; as a rule, we assemble there in Summer instead of in the drawing-room, which, of course, is more convenient, and decidedly more gloomy."

"I have an all-conquering curiosity to know everything about everybody down here," says Portia, as they reach the balcony. Dulce pushes a low, sleepy-looking chair toward her, and, sinking gracefully into it, she turns her eyes up to her cousin. "Tell me all about your Roger," she says, languidly. "As I must begin with somebody, I think I shall prefer beginning with—with—what shall I call him? Your young man?"

"It sounds like Martha's baker's boy," says Dulce, laughing; "but you may call Roger what you like. I wish with all my heart you could call him husband, as that would take him out of my way."

They are standing on the balcony, and are looking toward the South. Beyond them stretch the lawns, green and sloping; from below, the breath of the sleeping flowers comes up to greet them; through the trees in the far, far distance comes to them a glimpse of the great ocean as it lies calm and silent, almost to melancholy, but for the soft lap, lapping of the waves upon the pebbly shore.

"Some one told me he was very handsome," says Portia, at a venture. Perhaps she has heard this, perhaps she hasn't. It even seems to her there is more truth in the "has" than in the "hasn't."

"I have seen uglier people," admits Dulcinea, regretfully; "when he has his face washed, and his hair brushed, he isn't half a bad boy."

"Boy?" asks Portia, doubtfully; to her the foregoing speech is full of difficulty.

"I daresay *you* would call him a man," says Dulce, with a shrug of her soft shoulders; but really he isn't. If you had grown up with him, as I have, you would never think of him

as being anything but an overgrown baby, and a very cross one. That is the worst of being brought up with a person, and being told one is to marry him by-and-by. It rather takes the gilt off him, I think," says Dulce with a small smile.

"But why must you marry him?" asks Portia, opening her large black fan in an indolent fashion, and waving it to and fro.

The sun retiring

"On waves of glory, like an ocean god,"

flings over her a pale, pink halo, that renders even more delicately fine the beauty of her complexion. A passing breeze flings into her lap a few rose-leaves from a trailing tree that has climbed the balcony, and is now nodding drowsily as the day slowly dies. She is feeling a little sorry for Dulce, who is reciting her family history with such a doleful air.

"Well, I needn't, you know," says that young lady, lightly; "not if I don't choose, you know. I have got until I am twenty-one to think about it, and I am only eighteen now. I daresay I shall cry-off at the last moment; indeed, I am sure I shall," with a wilful shake of the head, "because Roger, at times, is quite too much, and utterly insupportable; yet, in that case, I shall vex Uncle Christopher, and I do so love Uncle Christopher!"

"But he had nothing to do with the arrangement, had he?"

"Nothing. It was his brother, Uncle Humphrey, who made the mistake. He left the property between us on condition we married each other. Whichever of us, at twenty-one, declines to carry out the agreement, gets £500 a year off the property, and the rest goes to the happy rejected. It is a charming place, about six miles from this, all lakes and trees, and the most enchanting gardens. I daresay Roger would be delighted if I would give him up, but" (vindictively) "I shan't. He shall never get those delicious gardens all to himself."

"What an eccentric will," says Portia.

"Well, hardly that. The place is very large, and requires money to keep it up. If he had divided the income between us, and we had been at liberty to go each our own way, the possessor of the house and lands would not have had enough

money to keep it in proper order. I think it rather a just will. I wish it had been differently arranged, of course, but it can't be helped now."

"Is he your first cousin? You know I have heard very little about this branch of my family, having lived so long in India."

"No, my second cousin. Fabian is Uncle Christopher's heir, but if—if he died, Roger would inherit title and all. That is another reason why I hate him. Why should he have even a distant claim to anything that belongs to Fabian?"

"But, my dear girl, you are not going to marry a man you hate?" says Portia, sitting up very straight, and forgetting to wave her fan.

"Not exactly," says Dulce, meditatively; "I really don't think I hate him, but he can be disagreeable, I promise you."

"But if you marry him, hardly tolerating him, and afterwards you meet somebody you can love, how will it be with you then?"

"Oh, I shan't do that," she says; "I have felt so married to Roger for years, that it would be positively indecent of me, even *now*, to fall in love with any one. In fact I couldn't."

"I daresay, after all, you like him well enough," says Miss Vibart, with her low, soft laugh. "Mark Gore says you are exactly suited to each other."

"Mark Gore is a confirmed old bachelor, and knows nothing," says Dulce, contemptuously.

"Yet once, they say, he was hopelessly in love with Phyllis Carrington."

"So he was. It was quite a romance, and he was the hero."

"Phyllis is quite everything she ought to be, and utterly sweet," says Portia, thoughtfully. "But *is* she the sort of person to create a *grande passion* in a man like Mark?"

"I daresay. Her eyes are lovely; so babyish, yet so full of latent coquetry. A man of the world, like Mark, would like that sort of thing. But it is all over now, quite a worn-out tale. He visits there at stated times, and she has thoughts only for her baby and her 'Duke,' as she calls her husband."

"I wonder," says Miss Vibart, with a faint yawn, "if at times she doesn't find that a [illegible]

Then she grows a little ashamed of herself, as she catches Dulce's quick, puzzled glance.

"It is a very pretty baby," says Dulce, as though anxious to explain matters.

"And what can be more adorable than a pretty baby?" responds her cousin, with a charming smile. "Now do tell me"—quickly, and as though to change the current of her companion's thoughts—"how many people are in this house, and who they are, and everything that is bad and good about them."

Dulce laughs.

"We come and go," she says. "It would be hard to arrange us. *I* am always here, and Uncle Christopher, and—Fabian. Roger calls this his home, too, but sometimes he goes away for awhile, and Dicky's room is always kept for him. We are all cousins pretty nearly, and there is one peculiarity—I mean, Uncle Christopher makes no one welcome who does not believe—in—Fabian."

Her voice falls slightly as she makes the last remark, and she turns her head aside, and, leaning over the balcony, plays absently with a rosebud that is growing within her reach. In this position she cannot see that Portia has colored warmly, and is watching her with some curiosity.

"You must try to like Fabian," says Dulce, presently. Her voice is sad, but quite composed. She appears mournful, but not disconcerted. "You have no doubt heard his unfortunate story from Auntie Maud, and—*you* believe in him, don't you?" She raises her eyes to her cousin's face.

"I hardly think I have quite heard the story," says Miss Vibart evasively.

"No? It is a very sad one, and quite unaccountable. If you have heard anything about it, you have heard all I can tell you. Nothing has ever been explained; I am afraid now nothing ever will be. It rests as it did at the beginning—that is the pity of it—but you shall hear."

"Not if it distresses you," says Portia gently. A feeling of utter pity for Fabian's sister, with all her faith and trust so full upon her at this moment, touches her keenly. As for the story itself, she has heard it a score of times, with variations, from Auntie Maud. But then, when brought to bay, what *can* one say!

"It will not distress me," says Dulce, earnestly; "and I

would so much rather you knew everything before you meet him. It will make things smoother. It all happened four long years ago—years that to him must seem a lifetime. He is twenty-nine now, he was only twenty-five then, just the time, I suppose, when life should be sweetest."

"It is mere accident makes life sweet at times," says Portia. "It has nothing to do with years, or place, or beauty. But tell me about your brother."

"He had just come home for his leave. He was so handsome, and so happy—without a care on earth—and was such a pet with the men in his regiment. I was only a child then, but he never seemed too old to talk to me, or to make me his companion. And then one morning it all happened; we were at breakfast—as we might be to-morrow"—says poor Dulce, with a comprehensive gesture, "when one of the men came in and said somebody wanted to speak to Uncle Christopher. When I think of it"—with a long-drawn sigh—"my blood seems to run cold. And even now, whenever Harley comes in at breakfast and bends over Uncle Christopher in a confidential way to tell him—it may be—about the puppies or the last filly, a sensation of faintness creeps over me."

"I don't wonder," says Portia, feelingly. "How could one ever forget it? You are making yourself unhappy; go no farther now, but tell me about it another time."

"As I have begun I shall finish," says Dulce, heroically, "even at the risk of boring you. But"—wistfully—"you will forgive me that."

"Go on; I *want* to hear," says Portia, strangely moved. Yet it seems cruel to make her repeat what she knows so well already, and what is so bitter to the narrator.

"Well, Uncle Christopher went out to see the man who wanted him, and after a little bit came back again, with a white face, and told us one of the clerks at the County Bank had dared to say Fabian had forged his—Uncle Christopher's—name for £500. I think I hardly understood; but Fabian got up, and first he grew very red, and then very white, but he said nothing. He only motioned to me not to stir, so I sat quite still, and then he went up to Uncle Christopher, who was very angry, and laid his hand upon his arm and led him out of the room."

She pauses.

"Dulcinea," as yet the more familiar appellation "Dulce"

is strange to Miss Vibart. "Dulcinea," she says, very sweetly, holding out a soft, pale, jewelled hand, with tender meaning, "come and sit here beside me."

Dulce is grateful for the unspoken sympathy, but instead of accepting half the lounging chair, which is of a goodly size, she sits down upon a cushion at Portia's feet, and leans her auburn head against her knee.

"It was quite true that somebody had forged Uncle Christopher's name for £500, but who it was has never transpired. Uncle Christopher wanted to hush it up, but Fabian would not let him. The writing was certainly Fabian's, I mean the initation was exactly like it. I saw it myself; it was so like Fabian's that no one could possibly know one from the other. You see"—wistfully—"I am terribly honest, am I not? I do not pretend to see a necessary flaw,"

"I like you the better for that," says Portia; involuntarily she lays her hand on Dulcinea's throat, just under her chin, and presses her gently towards her. "If it will make you happier tell me the rest," she says.

"Unfortunately at that time Fabian *did* want money. Not much you know, but the fact that he wanted it at all was fatal. He had lost something over the Grand National—or one of those horrid races—and people heard of it; and then, even after long waiting and strictest inquiry, we could not discover who had been the real offender, and that was worst of all. It seemed to lay the crime forever upon Fabian's shoulders. He nearly went mad at that time, and we, who loved him, could do nothing to comfort him."

"Ah! that was hard," says Portia, leaning over her. "Not to be able to lift the burden from those whose life is dear to us as our own. is almost more than one can bear!"

"How you understand," says Dulce, gratefully. "And then, you see, somehow every one got to know about it; Fabian could not prove his innocence, and—I suppose—the story sounded badly in alien ears. And then there came a day when somebody—Lord Ardley I think—cut Fabian publicly, and that made an end of all things. Uncle Christopher wanted to take notice of that, too—wanted I think" (with a wan smile that has no mirth in it) "to challenge Lord Ardley and carry him over to France and fight it out with him *à la mort*, but Fabian would not allow it, and I think he was right."

"Quite right." There was quite a ring in Miss Vibart's tone as she says this, but Dulce is too occupied with sad retrospect to notice anything at this moment. "How could the writing have so exactly resembled Fabian's?" she says, presently; "it was Uncle Christopher's name was forged, was it not?"

"Yes, but Fabian writes exactly like him. He makes his capitals quite the same. Anyone trying to copy Uncle Christopher's writing would probably succeed in imitating Fabian's perfectly."

"Ah! he writes like Uncle Christopher," says Portia, slowly, as though adding another link in her own mind to a conclusion already carefully formed.

"You will like him, I think," says Dulce, getting up from her low position as though restless and desirous of change. She leans her back against the balcony and faces her cousin. "Though he is terribly altered; so different to what he used to be. He is so grave now, and silent and moody. He seems to be ever brooding over the mystery of his own life, and trying—trying to get away from everybody. Oh! how he suffered, how we all suffered just then, knowing him to be innocent."

"You knew he was innocent?" says Miss Vibart. Unfortunately her tone is one of inquiry. She has her hands clasped in her lap and is looking steadily at Dulce, who is watching her intently from the railings of the balcony, where she stands framed in by roses. Miss Vibart's fan has slipped to the ground; she is really interested in this story. May not the hero of it prove an absorbing study? Her tone, however, grates upon the ears of the "absorbing study's" sister. Dulce flushes perceptibly; opens her lips hastily as though to speak, and then suppresses herself.

"I forgot," she says, quietly, after a moment's reflection, "you have never seen him."

The faith in this small remark touches Portia keenly—the more in that she has already formed her own opinion on the subject in hand.

"I wonder he stayed here after it happened," she says, with some faint acceleration of manner. Haste to Portia, is a word unknown.

"He is a hero, a martyr," says Dulce, earnestly, two large tears gathering in her eyes. "He was in the K.D.Gs., as you

know, but of course he flung up his commission then, and was going abroad, when Uncle Christopher fell ill. So ill, that we despaired of him. And when even the doctor from London refused him hope, he called Fabian to his bedside and made him swear he would not leave him while he lived—and then he recovered. But he has always held Fabian to his word; and, indeed, it was a very necessary promise, because I don't think Uncle Christopher could live without him now. It is all terribly sad; but it would be worse if Fabian were really in fault, would it not?"

"It is all very sad," says Portia. Her eyes are bent, and she is slowly turning a ring round and round upon her finger.

"It has ruined Fabian's life, and broken his heart," says Dulce, in a low tone. "It is more than sad."

"But if innocent, why should it weigh so heavily upon him?" asks Portia, gently.

"*If*," says Dulce, quickly, the hot blood mounting to her cheeks. Then—very coldly—"There is no 'if' about it; he *is* innocent. However mysterious his unhappy story may sound in a strang— in your ears, nevertheless, our Fabian has nothing to do with disgrace. It could not touch him."

"I put it badly," says Portia, correcting her mistake with much grace. "I should have said *as* he is innocent. Forgive me."

"It was all a mistake," says Dulce, who is now very pale, "But we are so unaccustomed to even the faintest doubt of Fabian. Even Mark Gore, the sceptic, believes in him. How tired you look; would you like another cushion to your back?"

"No, thank you. I am quite comfortable and quite happy. Do you know," with a slow, lovely smile, "I rather mean that last conventional phrase: I *am* happy; I feel at rest. I know I shall feel no want here in this delicious old place—with you!" This is prettily toned, and Dulce smiles again. "I am so tired of town and its ways."

"You will miss your season, however," says Dulce, regretfully—for *her*.

"Yes, *isn't* that a comfort?" says her cousin, with a devout sigh of deepest thankfulness.

"A comfort!"

"Yes. I am not strong enough to go about much, and Auntie Maud has that sort of thing on the brain. She is like

the brook—she goes on for ever, nothing stops her. Ah! See now, for example, who are those coming across the lawn? Is one your brother?"

"No! It is only Dicky Browne and—"

"Your Roger?"

"Oh! yes; my Roger," repeats Dulce, with a distasteful shrug.

Then she leans over the balcony, and says:

"Roger, come up here directly; for once in your life you are wanted by somebody. And you are to come, too, Dicky, and please put on your Sunday manners, both you boys, because I am going to introduce you to Portia!"

CHAPTER III.

"Whether youth can be imputed to any man as a reproach, I will not, sir, assume the province of determining."—W. PITT.

THE boys, as Miss Blount—that is Dulce—irreverently terms them, are coming slowly across the grass, trampling the patient daisies. The sun has "dropped down" and the "day is dead," and twilight, coming up, is covering all the land. A sort of subtle sadness lies on everything, *except* "the boys," they are evidently full of the enjoyment of some joke, and are gay with smiles.

Mr. Browne is especially glad, which convines his pretty cousin on the balcony that he has been the perpetrator of the "good thing" just recorded. At her voice, both he and his companion start, and Roger, raising his eyes, meets hers.

He is a tall, slight young man, handsome, indolent, with dark eyes, and a dark moustache, and a very expressive mouth.

Dicky is distinctly different, and perhaps more difficult of description. If I say he is a little short, and a little stout, and a little—a *very* little—good looking, will you understand him? At least he is beaming with *bonhommie*, and that goes a long way with most people.

He seems now rather taken by Dulce's speech, and says:

"No! Has she really come?" in a loud voice, that is cheery and comfortable to the last degree. He can't see Portia, as she is sitting down, and is quite hidden from view by the trailing roses. "Is she all your fancy painted her?"

is she 'lovely and divine?'" goes on Mr. Browne, gaily, as though seeking information.

"Beauties are always overrated," says Roger, sententiously, in an even louder voice—indeed, at the very top of his strong young lungs—"just tell somebody that somebody else thinks so-and-so fit to pose as a Venus, and the thing is done, and so-and-so becomes a beauty on the spot! I say, Dulce, I bet you anything she is as ordinary as you please, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot!"

"I can't follow up that bet," says Dulce, who has changed her position so as effectually to conceal Portia from view, and who is evidently deriving intense joy from the situation, "because I have only seen her face and her hands; and they, to say the least, are passable!"

"Passable! I told you so!" says Roger, turning to Dicky Browne, with fine disgust. "Is she æsthetic?"

"No."

"Fast?" asks Dicky, anxiously.

"No."

"Stupid—dull—impossible?"

"No, no, no."

"I thank my stars," says Dicky Browne, devoutly.

"Can't you describe her?" asks Roger, impatiently staring up from the sward beneath at Dulce's charming, wicked little face.

"She has two eyes, and a very remarkable nose," says Miss Blount, with a nod.

"Celestial or Roman?" demands Roger, lazily. By this time he and Dicky are mounting the stone steps of the balcony, and discovery is imminent.

"I think it is a little unfair," murmurs Portia, in a low whisper, who is, however, consumed with laughter.

At this moment they reach the balcony, and Dulce says, blandly, *àpropos* of Roger's last remark, "Perhaps if you ask her that question, *as she is here*, she will answer you herself!"

She waves her hand towards Portia. Portia rises and comes a step forward, all her soft draperies making a soft *frou-frou* upon the stone flooring; and then there is a good deal of consternation! and a *tableau* generally.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," says Roger, when breath returns to him, casting an annihilating glance at Dulce, who catches it deftly, plays with it for a moment, and then flings

it carelessly over the balcony into the rising mist and night.

"Whatever you beg you shall have," says Portia, coming nearer to him and holding out a slim white hand. "How d'ye do, Roger?"

"It is quite too good of you to forgive me so soon," says that young man, pressing with deep gratitude the slim, friendly hand. "It was beastly mean of Dulce, she *might* have told us"—this with another glance, meant to wither, at that mischievous maiden, who rather revels in her guilt. "My only apology is that I didn't know you—had never seen you, or I could not so have expressed myself."

"What a clever apology," murmurs Portia. "And what flattering emphasis!" She smiles at him pleasantly through the fast gathering gloom. "You will now introduce me to your friend, will you not?"

"Dicky, come forward and make your best bow," says Dulce. Whereupon, Mr. Browne, with a shamefaced laugh, comes to the front, and, standing before Miss Vibart like a criminal at the bar of justice, bends very low.

"Miss Vibart—Mr. Browne," says Roger, seriously. But at this Dicky forgets himself, and throws dignity to the winds.

"She called *you* Roger! I'm as much her cousin as ever you were!" he says, indignantly. "*Mr.* Browne, indeed!"

At this, both girls laugh merrily, and so, after a bit, does Dicky himself, to whose soul the mildest mirth is an everlasting joy.

"I am then to call you Dicky?" asks Portia, smiling, and lifting her eyes as though half-reluctantly to his; she has quite entered into the spirit of the thing.

"If you will be so very good," says Dicky Browne.

"You really had better," says Dulce, "because you are likely to see a good deal of him, and perpetually addressing people by their proper names *is* so tiring."

"It is true," says Portia; then turning to Dicky Browne, with half-closed lids and a subdued smile, she says, slowly:

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

It has its charm, this lowered tone. Dicky gives in to it; and—metaphorically speaking—instantly prostrates himself at Miss Vibart's feet.

Perhaps he might have done so actually without metaphor, Dicky's conduct being at times uncertain, but for a timely interruption.

"Any chance of dinner to-night?" says a cheery old voice behind them, and turning, they see Sir Christopher standing inside the open window of the drawing room, smiling upon them with the utmost benignity. "Portia, my dear," he says, genially, as though he and she have been intimate for years, "we are all so young here, we hardly require sustenance. Nevertheless, let me take you into the dining-room, if only to see what cook has provided for us."

Portia lays her hand upon his arm, and, followed by the others (who are plainly quarreling in a warm, if subdued fashion, goes into the grand old dining-room. Roger takes the foot of the table; Dicky seats himself next Portia; Dulce, as she always does when no foreign guests are present, or, as she terms it, on "off-days," seats herself near Uncle Christopher.

One place, however, is empty; by right it is Roger's, who, except when Fabian is absent, never sits at the foot of the table.

Sir Christopher fusses a little, grows discontented, and finally says uneasily—

"Where is Fabian?"

"He has a headache, dear," says Dulce, gently. "He hopes we will all excuse him—especially Portia."

She turns with a sweet glance to Portia, who murmurs something civil in return.

"He would be better here than moping in his own room," says Sir Christopher, in a low voice. His spirits are evidently damped, though he makes an effort to suppress the fact; his smile grows faded, and less frequent, and presently dies away altogether. Every one makes a noble effort at conversation, and every one, after a bit, breaks down ignominiously and looks at his or her fish, as though in it lies some hidden charm.

Dicky Browne alone remains unimpressed by the gloom of the surroundings. He is thinking the filleted sole very good indeed, and is lost to all other ideas.

"Tell you who I saw to-day," he says, airily, "Boer. That clergyman fellow, you know, who married that annoying girl who used to be always at Chetwoode. I spent half an hour with him in the High Street, just opposite the club."

"How you *must* have enjoyed yourself!" says Roger, feelingly. "How I wish I could have put myself in your place at that moment."

"Don't you! Not being selfish, I would willingly have resigned to you the intellectual treat I endured! All things have their end, however, even my patience, which is known to be elastic like my conscience; so, as a last resource, I offered him a brandy and soda, and, as it turned out, it was quite the best thing I could have done under the circumstances. He looked awfully angry, and went away directly."

"Clever boy!" says Roger. "For the future I shall know exactly what to do when the reverend Boer inflicts his small talk on *me*. Dead sell, though, if he accepted your offer. One would have to sit it out with him, and, probably, he takes his brandy slowly."

"I don't believe he ever took any in his life," says Dulce, idly. "That is why the chill has never been removed from him. How I wish he could be thawed."

"I always feel so sorry for Florence," says Portia, languidly; she is feeling very tired, and is hardly eating anything. From time to time she looks at Sir Christopher, and wonders vaguely if it is her presence has kept Fabian from dinner to-night. "But Mr. Boer reads very well."

"When he doesn't turn over two pages at once," says Dicky Browne. "That is a favorite amusement of his, and it rather makes a mess of the meaning contained in holy writ. He is rather touchy about that last little *fiasco* of his when reading before the bishop the other day, so I thought I would tell him a story to-day that chimed in deliciously with his own little mistake, and, I doubt not, brought it fresh to his mind."

"What a wicked humor you must have been in," says Portia. "Tell the story to us now."

"You have heard it, I daresay. I only repeated it to Boer in the fond hope he would go away if I did, but it failed me. It was about the fellow who was reading the morning lesson—and he came to the words, 'and he took unto him a wife'—then he turned over two pages by mistake, and went on, 'and he pitched her with pitch within and without!' I don't think Boer liked my little story, but still he wouldn't go away."

"He is a dreadfully prosy person, and very material," says Portia, when they have all laughed a little.

"He is a jolly nuisance," says Mr. Browne.

"He hasn't got much soul, if you mean that," says Roger—

> "'A primrose by a river's brim,
> A yellow primrose is to him
> And it is nothing more.'"

"That *is* such utter nonsense," says Dulce, tilting her pretty nose and casting a slighting glance at her *fiancé* from eyes that are

> "The greenest of things blue,
> The bluest of things gray."

"What more *would* it be?—a hollyhock, perhaps? or a rhododendron, eh?"

"Anything you like," says Roger, calmly, which rather finishes the discussion.

The night belongs to warm, lovable June; all the windows are wide open; the perfume of flowers comes to them from the gardens beneath, that are flooded with yellow moonshine. So still it is, so calm, that one can almost hear the love-song the languid breeze is whispering to the swaying boughs.

Across the table come the dreamy sighs of night, and sink into Portia's heart, as she sits silent, pleased, listening to all around, yet a little grieved in that her host is strangely silent, too, and looks as one might who is striving to hear the sound of a distant footstep, that comes not ever.

"He is always that way when Fabian absents himself," says Dicky Browne, with so little preface that Portia starts. "He adores the ground he walks on, and all that sort of thing. Speak to him and get him out of it."

"What shall I say?" asks Miss Vibart, somewhat taken aback. "Moods are so difficult."

"Anything likely to please him."

"My difficulty just lies there," says Portia.

"Then *do* something, if you can't say it. Exertion, I know, is unpleasant, especially in June, but one must sacrifice one's self sometimes," says Dicky Browne. "He'll be awfully bad presently if he isn't brought up pretty short by somebody during the next minute or so."

"But what can I do?" says Portia, who is rather impressed by Mr. Browne's earnestness.

"You hate port, don't you?" asks he, mysteriously.

"Yes. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Take some presently. It is poison, and will make you

dreadfully ill; but that don't count when duty calls. We all hate it, but he likes it, and will feel positively benevolent if you will only say you like it too. 'Pride in his *port*, defiance in his eye!'—that line, I am convinced, was written for him alone, but modern readers have put a false construction upon it."

"It will make me *so* unhappy," says Portia, looking at Uncle Christopher with a pitying eye. The pity is for him, not for herself, as Dicky foolishly imagines.

"Don't think about that," he says, valiantly. "Petty inconveniences sink into nothingness when love points the way. Take your port, and try to look as if you liked it, and always remember, 'Virtue is its own reward!'"

"A very poor one, as a rule," says Portia.

"Have some strawberries, Portia?" asks Roger at this moment, who has been sparring with Dulce, mildly, but firmly, all this time.

"Thank you," says Portia.

"They don't go well with port, and Portia adores port," says Mr. Browne, hospitably, smiling blandly at her as he speaks.

She returns his smile with one of deep reproach.

"Eh? No, do you really?" asks Sir Christopher, waking as if by magic from his distasteful reverie. "Then, my dear, I can recommend this. Very old. Very fruity. Just what your poor father used to like."

"Yes—your *poor* father," says Dicky Browne *sotto voce*, feelingly and in a tone rich with delicate encouragement.

"Thank you. Half a glass please. I—I never take more," say Portia, hastily but sweetly, to Sir Christopher. who is bent on giving her a goodly share of what he believes to be her heart's desire. Then she drinks it to please him, and smiles faintly behind her fan and tells herself Dicky Browne is the very oddest boy she has ever met in her life, and amusing, if a little troublesome.

Sir Christopher once roused, chatters on ceaselessly about the old days when he and Charles Vibart, her father, were boys together, and before pretty Clara Blount fell in love with Vibart and married him. And Portia listens dreamily, and gazing through the open window lets part of the music of the scene outside sink into his ancient tales, and feels a great longing rise within her to get up and go out into the mystic

moonbeams, and bathe her tired hands and forehead in their cool rays.

Dulce and Roger are, as usual, quarreling in a deadly, if carefully-subdued fashion. Dicky Browne, as usual, too, is eating anything and everything that comes within his reach, and is apparently supremely happy. At this moment Portia's longing having mastered her, she turns to Dulce and asks softly:

"What is that faint streak of white I see out there, through, and beyond, the branches?"

"Our lake," says Dulce, half turning her head in its direction.

"Our pond," says Roger, calmly.

"Our *lake*," repeats Dulcinea, firmly; at which Portia, feeling war to be once more imminent, says hastily—

"It looks quite lovely from this—so faint, so silvery."

"It shows charmingly when the moon is up, through that tangled mass of roses, far down there," says Dulce, with a gesture toward the tangle.

"I should like to go to it," says Portia, with unusual animation.

"So you shall, to-morrow.

"The moon will not be there to-morrow. I want to go now."

"Then so you shall," says Dulce, rising; "have you had enough strawberries? Yes? Will you not finish your wine? No? Come with me, then, and the boys may follow us when they can tear themselves away from their claret!" This, with a scornful glance at Roger, who returns it generously.

"I shall find it very easy to tear myself away to-night," he says, bent on revenge, and smiling tenderly at Portia.

"So!" says Dulce, with a shrug and a light laugh that reduces his attempt at scorn to a puerile effort unworthy of notice; "a compliment to *you* Portia; and—the other thing to me. We thank you, Roger. Come." She lays her hand on Portia's, and draws her toward the window. Passing by Uncle Christopher's chair, she lets her fingers fall upon his shoulder, and wander across it, so as just to touch his neck, with a caressing movement. Then she steps out on the verandah, followed by Portia, and both girls running down the stone steps are soon lost to sight among the flowers.

CHAPTER IV.

"'Tis not mine to forget. Yet can I not
Remember what I would or what were well.
Memory plays tyrant with me, by a wand
I cannot master!" G. MELLEN.

PAST the roses, past the fragrant mignonette they go, the moon's soft radiance rendering still more fair the whiteness of their rounded arms.

The dew lies heavy on leaf and flower. Motionless stand the roses, and the drooping lilies, and the pansies, purple and yellow. "God Almighty," says Bacon, "first planted a garden; and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures; it is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man!"

Here, now, in this particular garden, where all is so deeply tranquil, it seems as if life itself is at a standstill, and sin and suffering, joy and ambition, are alike unknown. A "pure pleasure" it is indeed to gaze upon it, and a great refreshment to any soul tired, or overwrought, or sorrowful.

The stars are coming out slowly one by one, studding brilliantly the pale, blue vault of heaven, while from a

"Thin fleecy cloud,
Like a fair virgin veil'd, the moon looks out
With such serene and sweet benignity
That night unknits his gloomy brows and smiles."

Dulce, plucking some pale blossom, lifts it to her lips, and kisses it lightly. Portia, drawing a deep breath of intensest satisfaction, stands quite still, and letting her clasped hands fall loosely before her, contemplates the perfect scene in mute delight.

Presently, however, she shivers, a passing breeze has cast a chill upon her.

"Ah! you are cold," says Dulce, anxiously; "how thoughtless I am; yes, you are quite pale."

"Am I?" says Portia. "It was the standing here, I fancy. India gave me bad habits, that, after three years, I find myself unable to conquer. Every silly little wind strikes a chill to my heart."

"I shall get you a shawl in no time," says Dulcinea; "but keep walking up and down while I am away, so as to keep your blood warm."

"Your command shall be obeyed," says Portia, smiling.

and then Dulce, turning, disappears quickly amongst the shadows, moving as swiftly as her light young feet can carry her.

Portia, left alone, prepares to keep her promise, and walks slowly along the graveled path once more. Turning a corner, again a glimpse of the distant lake comes to her. It is entrancing; calm as sleep, and pure as the moon above, whose image lies upon its breast.

Even as she looks the image fades—the "fleecy cloud" (jealous, perhaps, of the beauty of the divine Artemis, and of Portia's open admiration of her) has floated over her again, and driven her, for a little moment, into positive obscurity.

The path grows dark, the lake loses its color. Portia, with a sigh, moves on, confessing to herself the mutability of all things, and pushing aside some low-lying branches of a heavily-scented shrub, finds herself face to face with a tall young man, who, apparently, is as lost in wonder at her appearance as she is at his!

She starts, perceptibly, and, only half-suppressing a faint exclamation of fear, shrinks backwards.

"I beg your pardon," says the stranger, hastily. "I am afraid I have frightened you. But, really, it was all the fault of the moon."

His voice is reassuring, and Portia, drawing her breath more freely, feels just a little ashamed of her momentary terror.

"I am not frightened now," she says, with an upward glance, trying to read, through the darkness, the face of him she addresses. The clouds are scurrying swiftly across the sky, and now the moon shines forth again triumphant, and all things grow clearer. She can see that he is tall, dark, handsome, with a strange expression round his mouth that is surely more acquired than natural, as it does not suit his other features at all, and may be termed hard and reckless, and almost defiant. His jaw is exquisitely turned. In his eyes is a settled melancholy—altogether his face betrays strong emotions, severely repressed, and is half-morbid and wholly sad, and, when all is said, more attractive than forbidding.

Portia, gazing at him with interest, tells herself that years of mental suffering could alone have produced the hard lines round the lips and the weariness in the eyes. She has no time for further speculation, however, and goes on quickly:

"It was more than foolish of me; but I quite forgot, I"—with some uncertainty—"should have remembered."

"What do you forget? and what should you have remembered?"

"I forgot that burglars do not, as a rule, I suppose, go about in evening clothes; and I should have remembered"—with a smile—"that there was yet another cousin to whom I had not been introduced."

"Yes; I am Fabian Blount," he says indifferently. He does not return her smile. Almost he gives her the impression that at this moment he would gladly have substituted another name for his own.

"Ah! you are Fabian," she says, half-puzzled by his manner.

"If you will take my word for it." His tone is even more strange as he says this, and now he *does* smile, but disagreeably.

Portia colors faintly.

"You have not asked me my name?" she says quietly. "I am Portia."

"What a very pretty name!" He has had a half-smoked cigar behind his back all this time; now remembering it, he looks at it, and flings it far from him. "It reminds one of many things; Shakespeare, I suppose principally. I hope," looking at her, "*you* will choose the right casket."

"Thank you. That is a very kindly wish."

"How does it happen that you are here all alone?"

"I was cold; I always am. Dulcinea saw me shiver, I think, and ran to get a shawl or some covering for me. That is all."

"She is a long time getting it, is she not?"

"Is she?" says Portia. This speech of his piques her a little. "Does it seem long?"

"Very long, if one is to shiver all the time," replies he, calmly, reading her resentment in her face, but taking no notice of it. "Much too long to be out in this chilly night-air without sufficient clothing, and with a wholesome dread of possible burglars full upon you. May I stay with you till Dulce returns, and will you walk on a little? It is foolish to stand still."

"I am sorry you threw away your cigar on my account. I am sure you want it now."

"I don't believe I ever want anything," says Fabian, slowly; and then they walk on again, returning by the way she had come. The night-wallflower is flinging its perfume abroad, the seringas are making sweet the air, a light eager wind rushes softly past them.

"It was a long drive," says Fabian, presently, with all the air of a man who is determined to rouse himself—however against his will—and carry on conversation of some sort. "Are you tired?"

"It *was* long. But everything here is so new, so fresh, so sweet, that I have forgotten to be tired."

"You are one of those, perhaps, who always find variety charming." As he speaks he carefully removes a drooping branch of roses out of her way.

"Not quite always." She smiles as she defends herself. "I like old friends, and old songs best. I am not absolutely fickle. But I have always had a great desire to live in the country."

"People who have never tried it, always do have that desire."

"You think I shall be *desillusionne* in a week? But I shall not. When George had to return to India, I was so unhappy in the thought that perhaps I should have to live in town until his return. Of course I could have gone somewhere to live by myself, and could have found some charming old lady to take care of me, but I am not fond of my own society, and I can't bear charming old ladies."

"One feels quite sorry for the old ladies," says Fabian, absently.

"I was afraid I should have to put in my two years of waiting for George, with Auntie Maud, and that would have been terrible. It would mean seasons, and months at fashionable watering-places, which would be only town out of town—the same thing all over again. I was so glad when Uncle Christopher wrote to say he would like me to come here. I have often wondered since," she says, suddenly—smiling somewhat wistfully, and flushing a warm crimson,—"whether all of *you* didn't look upon my coming with disfavor."

"What put such a thought as that into your head?"

"A very natural one I think. A stranger coming to a household always makes such a difference; and you had never met me, and you might not like me, and—. Did any of you resent my coming?"

"No," says Fabian. There is no energy in his reply, yet it is impossible to doubt that he means exactly what he says. "You must not begin by thinking unkindly of us," he goes on, gently. "You may believe me when I say none of us felt anything but pleasure at the idea of your coming."

"Yes? That was very good of you all." She is longing to say, "Yet you see I kept you from dinner to-night," but after a moment's reflection leaves it unsaid.

"I hope the country will not disappoint you," he says, after a slight pause. "It is unwise to begin by expecting too much."

"How can it disappoint?" says Portia, with some intensity. She says nothing more, but she lifts her lovely face to the starry sky, and puts out her hands with a faint gesture, fraught with admiration, towards the heavy flowers, the distant lake, the statues half hidden by the drooping shrubs, and the moonlight sleeping upon all!

"There is always in the country, the sun, the flowers, and at night, the moon," she says.

"Yet, the day will come, even for you, when there will be no sun, and when the moon will refuse to give its light." He speaks peculiarly and as though his thoughts are wandering far from her to other scenes in which she holds no part.

"Still, there will always be the flowers," she says, quickly, impressed by his tone, and with a strange anxiety to prove to herself that surely all things are not in vain.

"Oh, no! They are the frailest of the three," returns he; "they are like our dearest hopes. At the very time they should prove true, when the cold Winter of our discontent is full upon us, they forsake us—never to return."

"Never? Does not the Summer bring them again?" She has stopped in the middle of the path, and is asking her question with an anxiety that astonishes even herself. "This rose bush," she says, pointing to one close beside her, "now rich in glory, and warm with golden wealth, will it not bloom again next year, in spite of the death that must pass over it?"

"It may. But you will never see again those roses over there, that you love and rejoice in now! Others may be like them, but they cannot be quite the same."

Portia makes no reply. The moonlight is full upon him, and she can see that his lips have lost their hardness, and are as full of melancholy as his eyes. She is looking curiously at him, regarding him perhaps in the light of a study—he is

looking, not at her at all, but at something that surely has no place in this quiet garden, lying so calm and peaceful beneath the light of heaven.

A terrible expression, that is despair and grief commingled, covers his face. Some past horror, that has yet power to sting, is holding him captive. He has forgotten Portia, the beauty of the night, everything! He is wrapt in some miserable memory that will not be laid. Surely, "the heart may break, yet brokenly live on."

Be he guilty (as she believes him) of this crime that has darkened his life, or only the victim of unhappy circumstances, at this moment Portia pities him with all her heart.

Voices in the distance! Roger and Dulce still high in argument; a faint perfume of cigarettes; Dicky Browne's irrepressible laugh; and then they all come round the corner, and somebody says, "Ah, here she is," and Dicky Browne places a shawl round Portia's shoulders.

"You here, Fabian?" says Dulce, gladly. "And making friends with Portia? That's right."

"Taking a mean advantage of us all I call it," says Dicky Browne. "*We* got introduced in the cruel glare of day, with all our imperfections on our heads. *You* waited for moonshine, balmy air, scent of roses, poetical effect, and so on! That's why you stayed away from dinner. And to think none of us saw through you! Well, I always said I was very innocent; quite unfit to go about alone!"

"Not a doubt of it," said Roger, cheerfully. "But you won't have to complain of that long. We are all on the look-out for a keeper for you, and a straight waistcoat." Then, turning to Fabian, "Your headache better, old man?"

"Thank you—yes. Your cousin is tired, I think, Dulce. Take her in and make her rest herself."

"Ah! You are worn out," says Dulce to Portia, with contrition. "I have been so long getting you the shawl; but I could not help it. You must not stay up, you know, to do manners to us, you must go straight to bed this moment, and come down like a rose in the morning. Now confess you are tired."

"Well, yes, I am afraid I am," says Portia, who is feeling faintly disappointed for the first time since her arrival. Why, she scarcely knows.

"She said 'I am a-weary, a-weary; I would I were a-bed,'"

quotes Mr. Browne, feelingly. Whereupon everyone feels it his duty to take Portia at once back to the house, less Mr. Browne, by any ill-luck, should commit himself still further.

It is only when Portia is at last alone in her own room that she recollects that Fabian forgot to shake hands with her. Or was it she with Fabian?

CHAPTER V.

"Oh, how full of briars is this working-day world!"
"As You Like It."

"I WISH you would *try* to remember," says Dulce, a little hastily. She is sitting in a rather Gothic chair, and the day is ultra-hot, and the strain upon her mental powers is greater than she can bear. Hence the haste.

She is leaning back in the uneasy chair now, pencil in hand, and is looking up at Roger, who is leaning over the table, in a somewhat supercilious manner, and is plainly giving him to understand that she thinks him a very stupid person, indeed.

This is irritating, and Roger naturally resents it. A few puckers show themselves upon his forehead, and he turns over a page or two of the gardener's book before him with a movement suggestive of impatience.

"I *am* trying," he says, shortly.

"Well, you needn't tear the book in pieces," says Dulce, severely.

"I'm not tearing anything," retorts Mr. Dare, indignantly.

"You look as if you wanted to," says Dulce.

"I don't want anything except to be let alone," says Mr. Dare.

The windows are all wide open. They were flung wide an hour ago, in the fond hope that some passing breeze might enter through them. But no breeze cometh—is not, indeed, born—and the windows yawn for it in vain. Outside, all Nature seems asleep; inside, the very curtains are motionless.

In a low rocking-chair, clad in the very lightest of garments permitted by civilization, sits Sir Mark Gore. He arrived at the Court only yesterday, in a perfect torrent of passionate rain, and was accused on all sides of having brought ill weather

in his train. But to-day having asserted itself, and dawned fairly, and later on having burst into matchless beauty, and heat of the most intense, he is enabled to turn the tables upon his accusers, who look small and rather crushed.

"Have they had such a day this season?"

"Never! Oh, never!"

"Have they ever seen so lovely a one?"

"Never—at least, *hardly* ever!"

They are vanquished. Whereupon he tells them they were distinctly ungrateful yesterday, and that he will never put in a good word for them with the clerk of the weather again. *Never!*

Just now he is nodding drowsily over his *Times*, and is vainly trying to remember whether the last passage read was about Midhat Pasha, or that horrid railway murder, or the Irish Land League.

In the next window sits Portia, clad in a snowy gown that suits her to perfection. She has been here now for a fortnight, and feels as if she had been here forever, and almost wonders if in reality she ever knew another home. She is lounging in the very easiest of cushioned chairs, and is making a base attempt at reading, which attempt is held up to public scorn every other minute by Dicky Browne, who is sitting at her feet.

He is half in and half out of the room. His feet being on the verandah, his head and shoulders in the room. He is talking a little, and fidgeting a little, and laughing a little, and, in fact, doing everything in the world except thinking a little. Thought and Dicky Browne are two.

The room in which they are all sitting is long and very handsome, with three windows and two fire-places. It is always called the blue room at the Court, for no earthly reason that any one can see, except that it is painted green—the very most impossible green, calculated to create rapture in the breasts of Oscar and his fellows; a charming color, too, soothing, and calm, and fashionable, which, of course, is everything. There are tiny cabinets everywhere, gay with majolica ware and many a Palissy dish; while Wedgewood, and Derby, and priceless Worcester shine out from every corner. There are Eastern rugs, and Japanese screens, and, indeed, everything that isn't Japanese is old English, and everything that isn't old English is Japanese—except, per-

haps, a few lounging-chairs of modern growth brought in to suit the requirements of such unæsthetic beings as prefer the comfortable satin-and-down lounge to the more correct, if more trying oak.

"Perhaps it was the Duke of Edinburgh," says Roger, breaking the silence that has lasted now for a full minute. "I see he is very handsome, of robust habit and constitution, and of enormous size and length. Is that what you want?"

"No; I am sure it was not the Duke of Edinburgh. It doesn't sound like him. I wonder why you can't think of it. I am sure if I once eat anything I should remember all about it."

"Good gracious!" says Dicky Browne, from his lowly seat, glancing solemnly at Portia, "have they eaten the Duke of Edinburgh? It sounds like it, doesn't it? They must have done it on the sly. And *what* a meal! Considering they acknowledge him to be of enormous size and length!"

"Perhaps it was Sir Garnet Wolseley," says Roger, moodily, in the discontented tone of one who is following out a task utterly repugnant to his feelings. "He has an excellent flavor, but is entirely destitute of shank or shoulder."

Sir Mark Gore, at this dreadful speech, lowers his paper and lifts his head. Portia looks faintly startled. What can Roger be talking about?

"Ain't it awful," says Mr. Browne, "who'd have thought it of them. They look quite mild—and—er—like other people. Positively they are cannibals! And (did you remark?) it is *roast shoulder* they prefer, because they are grumbling at the want of it in the unfortunate General who has evidently been enticed from his home and coldly murdered by them. I wonder it wasn't in the papers—but doubtless the family hushed it up. And how heartlessly they speak! But, by the way, what on earth is a *shank?*—"

"The neck is splendid, and, indeed, there is no waste whatever," goes on Roger, in a wooden tone.

"No waist whatever! Did you hear that? I always thought poor Sir Garnet was a lean man," says Dicky, *sotto voce.* "Poor, poor fellow, can nothing satisfy them but rank and talent?"

"Not a bit like it," breaks in Dulce, petulantly tapping her foot upon the floor. She is never petulant with any one

but Roger, being indeed, by nature, the very incarnation of sweetness and light.

"Give it up," says Roger, rising hope in his tone—hope that, alas, is never verified.

"And meet McIlray with such a lame story as that! Certainly not," says Dulce, warmly. "It must be found out. Do try again."

"Well, this must be it," says Roger, in despair, "The Marquis of Lorne, exquisite short neck, smooth skin, very straight, nice white spine."

At this Sir Mark rises to his feet.

"Really, my *dear* Roger!" he says, impulsively—but for the excessive laziness of his disposition it would have been severely.

"Ah," says Roger, glad of anything in the shape of a reprieve, even though it be unpleasant argument.

"How *can* Dulcinea find any interest in the color of the Marquis's spine?" says Sir Mark, reprovingly. "Forgive me if I say I think you are going a little too far."

"I shall have to go farther," says Roger, desperately, "There is no knowing where I shall end. She can't find it out, and neither can I, and I see no hope of our arriving at anything except a lunatic asylum."

"I can look it up by myself," says Miss Blount, grandly "I don't want your help—much. I daresay I can manage by myself, after all. And even if I can't, I daresay Mark will come to my assistance if you forsake me."

"I won't," says Gore, decidedly; "I won't indeed. I would do anything in the world for you, Dulcinea, as you know, but for this work unfortunately I am too modest. I *couldn't* go about making inquiries about the color of people's spines. I couldn't, indeed. As a matter of science I daresay it would be interesting to know the exact number of shades, but—I feel I am unequal to the task."

"The Duke of Connaught," goes on Roger, wearily, hope being stifled in his breast, "bright green skin, well covered with bloom; small neck and—"

"Oh! hang it all, you know," says Dicky Browne, forgetting himself in the excitement of the moment, "I don't believe his Royal Highness *has* a green skin, do you, Portia?—saw him only a fortnight ago, and he looked all right then, just as white as the rest of us."

"It's cucumbers," says Miss Blount, with dignity.

"Yes, cucumbers," responds Mr. Dare, with a sigh; he is evidently in the last stage of exhaustion. "McIlray has forgotten the name of some particular seed he planted in the Spring that we all liked immensely (how I wish we *hadn't*), and he has compelled Dulce to try and discover it. So we are looking for it in these infer—I mean these very prettily-illustrated books that the seedsman has kindly sent us (how I wish he hadn't), and hope to find it before the millenium. I daresay any time next month you will still find us here poring over these identical books. but we shall be *dead* then—there is at least comfort in that thought."

"One wouldn't think so, to look at you," said Gore, pleasantly.

"You can go away, Roger, you really can," says Dulce, irritably. "You are not the least use to me, and I hate grumblers."

"Perhaps it is the Empress of India," says Dicky Browne, who has come over to the table, driven by sheer curiosity, and is now leaning on Roger's shoulder. "She 'is of enormous length, and the handsomest this year. She is beautifully shaped throughout, with scarcely any handle.' Oh, I say, hasn't the Queen a handle to her name? What an aspersion upon her royal dignity."

"Ah! here is Fabian! Now, you may go away, all of you," said Dulce, with fine contempt. "He will really be of some use to me. Fabian, what is the name of the cucumber that tiresome McIlray wants? I am worn out, almost in hysterics, trying to remember it."

"What a pity you didn't ask me sooner," says Fabian. "It is all right. I made it out this morning, and told McIlray. He says now he remembers all about it perfectly."

"Fabian, may I shake hands with you. You are a man and a brother," says Roger, effusively, with a sudden return of animation. "I should, indeed, like to kiss you, but it might betray undue exhilaration. You have saved me from worse than death. Bless me, isn't it warm?"

"Just a little sultry," says Mr. Browne. "Show me that book you were looking at? Carter's, eh? How I love a work of that sort! I think I love Carter himself. I daresay it is he designs those improbable vegetables and fruits that would make their fortunes as giants at a penny show. You see there *are* giants in these days."

"Are there?" says Dulce. "I think there aren't."

"Well, it's just as simple," says Dicky, amiably. "Not a bit more trouble. It is quite as easy to suppose there aren't, as to suppose there are. *I* don't mind. But to return to our muttons. I really do esteem our Carter—in anticipation. It occurs to me he yet may grow peaches as big as my head, and then what a time we'll 'ave, eh?—Eating fruit is my forte," says Mr. Browne, with unction.

"So it is," says Dulce. "Nobody will dispute that point with you. You never leave us any worth speaking about. McIlray says you have eaten all the cherries, and that he can't even give us a decent dish for dinner."

"What vile alliteration," says Mr. Browne, unabashed. "Decent, dish, dinner. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Well, I'm not," says Dulce.

"Just shows your moral depravity. If you aren't you ought to be. Three great big D's in a breath! Shocking, shocking," says Dicky, gravely.

"What a heavenly day, and how depressing. We are never satisfied," says Mark Gore, flinging his arms above his head with a lazy gesture, and looking with almost comic despair at the pale-blue-and-gold glory in the heavens above.

Fabian, who has been standing near him, lost in a day-dream, starts perceptibly at his tone, and moves as though he would go towards the door. Then, though still a little absent, and still wrapt in the dream from which he has sought to free himself, he looks round the room as though in search of something. Perhaps he finds it as his eyes light upon the window where Portia sits, because they linger there, and the restless expression, that has characterized his face up to this, vanishes.

He hesitates; pushes a book upon a table near him backwards and forwards gently two or three times, as though in doubt, and then walks straight to the window where Portia is, leans against the sash, just where he can see the lovely, downcast face before him.

After Dicky's defection (or was it on Fabian's entrance?) Miss Vibart returned to her neglected book, and has been buried in it ever since. Even when Fabian comes and stands close to her, she is so engrossed with the beauty of the story that she forgets to lift her eyes to look at him. So deter-

minedly do they seek the page beneath them, that Fabian tells himself she must indeed have got to a thrilling part of her tale.

Her long, dark lashes lie like shadows on her cheeks. Her lips are closed. The hand that lies beneath the book trembles slightly.

They are all laughing at the upper end of the room at one of Dicky's absurdities. Down here by the far window, there is a silence marked enough to make itself felt. I think at last even Mark Gore feels it, because he rises from his comfortable rocking-chair with a faint yawn, and, walking down the room, comes to anchor behind Portia's chair.

Leaning over it, he says, pleasantly:

"Is that book of James' so very charming as to make you deaf and blind to us poor mortals?"

"I am never deaf or blind to you," says Portia, sweetly, glancing up at him over her shoulder. Her rounded chin is slightly tilted, a soft smile curves her lips.

At the Court Mark is a special favorite, yet so pretty a speech coming from Portia, who is usually so cold and indolent, strikes one as strange. Fabian regards her earnestly. How beautiful she is, yet how unsympathetic; has she no soul, no feeling? Surely her eyes, so large, so deep, so intense, belie this thought.

As though compelling himself, he says, with a visible effort:

"Have you been indoors all this lovely day? Has the sun had no power to tempt you to come out?"

"No;" she shakes her head as she answers him, and smiles, too, but the smile is cold as death, and though perfect, is altogether different from the one bestowed only a minute since upon Sir Mark.

"Then come out now," says Gore, as though pleasantly impressed by the suggestion conveyed in Fabian's speech. "Let us all shake off dull sloth and make a tour right round the gardens."

"A charming idea," says Portia, sitting more upright, and brightening visibly. She grows even animated. and animation, even of the faintest, is to be commended on such a day as this.

"Take your cousin to see the new carp-pond," says Gore, addressing Fabian, but watching Portia attentively. "You will like to see it. Portia?"

"So *very* much," says Portia. "But if I do go it must be with Dicky."

Her manner as she says this gives both the men fully to understand that early in the day she had pledged herself to go for a walk some time in the afternoon. So far, so good—it *might* have so explained itself—but, unfortunately, at this moment Dicky Browne (who, as Dulce says, is always in the wrong place at the wrong time) comes up behind them, and addresses them generally:

"What are you all conspiring about?" he says, genially. "Roger and Dulce, for the fourteenth time to-day, have again agreed to differ, so I seek refuge here. Take me in, will you? And, by-the-by, what shall we do with ourselves this grilling day!"

"I have just been suggesting a quiet stroll," says Sir Mark.

"The very thing," exclaims Mr. Browne, who is amiabilty itself. "Why on earth didn't we think of that before? Portia, if you will come with me, if you have not promised," with a glance at Sir Mark, "to go with anyone else, I will show you a new tennis-court that will draw tears of admiration from your eyes."

This is the unfortunate part of it. It now becomes apparent to every one that Dicky did *not* ask her early in the morning to go for a walk anywhere. Silence follows Dicky's speech. A faint pink color, delicate but distinct, creeps into Portia's cheeks; she does not lower her head, however, or her eyes either, but gazes steadily through the open window at the hills in the far, far distance, misty with heat and coming rain.

She feels that Fabian's eyes are on her, and inwardly resents his scrutiny. As for Fabian himself, his brow contracts, and a somewhat unpleasant expression mars the beauty of his face; yet, turning to Dicky with the utmost composure, he says, calmly:

"Take Portia to see the carp-pond; that may interest her."

"So I will," says Dicky. "But you come, too, old man; won't you? You understand all about fish, you know, and that, and I don't a little screw. Make him come, Portia; he talks like a book when he has got to explain things."

"Don't trouble Portia," says Fabian, quietly. "*Even she* could not persuade me to leave the house to-day, as I have business on hand that must be done."

There is the very faintest touch of sarcasm in his tone. The "even she," though very slightly done, is full of it. Portia, at least, is conscious of it. She unfurls her huge, black fan with a lazy gesture, and then turns her large eyes full upon him.

"So sorry my persuasions have failed," she says, slowly, not having persuaded him at all; and, satisfied with this speech, waves the fan indolently to and fro, and with half-closed eyes watches the merry little sunbeams outside as they run hither and thither over the grass.

"Oh! let us do something," says Dulce, from the distance. "I shall go mad if I am left here to talk to Roger all day."

"I am sure I don't want you to talk to me if it disagrees with you," says Roger, with ill-suppressed ire.

Then they tell her they are going for a gentle stroll before tea is ready, and she consents to go with them if Sir Mark will walk with her instead of Roger; and Roger, having indignantly disclaimed all anxiety to be her companion on this occasion, peace is restored, and they all sally forth armed with big, white umbrellas, to inspect the stupid carp.

Fabian alone remains indoors to transact the mysterious business, that I think would have been gladly laid aside had Portia so willed it. That she had absolutely refused to have him as her companion in her walk, was so evident at the time of her expressed desire to go to see the carp with Dicky Browne, that Fabian could not be blind to it. Standing in the window of the library now, with the dying sunset reddening the scene without, and shedding upon the flowers its tenderest tints of fair array, Fabian reminds himself of each word she had said, of each smallest smile and glance that had belonged to her, and at this moment hates her with a hatred that is exceptionally bitter.

Then a little wave flows over his soul, and he tells himself how that he is unjust, and a stranger cannot be reasonably expected to think him innocent of a crime he himself has been unable to refute.

The day wanes. Twilight falls; a flush of soft violet color deepens the sky The sound of footsteps echoes again in the long hall without; they have returned from the carp and the new tennis ground, and are asking eagerly for their tea. The sun has gone down behind the Western hills, and the stained-glass windows are throwing a sombre light over the antlers

and Gothic chairs, and mediæval furniture, in which the halls delight. Fabian, hearing the footsteps, pulls himself together somewhat roughly, and, opening a door that leads to a passage in little use, makes his way to a distant office, where he tells himself, bitterly, he is "far from the madding crowd," and free from intrusion.

Dulce and Portia, crossing the hall, go down the north corridor that leads to the library Fabian has just vacated. A heavy crimson curtain conceals a door on one side, and, as they pass, a figure, emerging from behind it, brushes somewhat brusquely against Portia, filling her with sudden alarm.

This figure, as it appears in the vague gloaming, is bowed and bent, and altogether uncanny.

Portia, shrinking closer to Dulce, lays her hand upon her arm.

"Ah! what was that?" she says, fearfully.

"Only Gregory Slyme," returns Dulce, quickly, "you are not frightened at *him*, poor old thing, are you? Have you not seen him before?"

"No," says Portia, with a shudder and a backward glance at the shrunken figure creeping away down the corridor as if ashamed of itself.

"No?—that is strange; but he has affected his own room a good deal of late."

"But who is he?" anxiously.

"He was Uncle Christopher's secretary for years, and calls himself that still, but Fabian does all the writing now."

"What a start he gave me," says Portia, putting her hand hurriedly to her heart as though in pain. "A chill seemed to rush all through my blood. It was as though I had met something that had worked, and would work, me harm!"

"Fanciful baby," says Dulce, with very superior scorn; "old Slyme could not work ill to anyone. He has lived with us for years; but lately, within the last eight months, he has become—well, a little uncomfortable; indeed, perhaps, unbearable is the word."

"How so?—what has he done?" asks Portia, unaccountably interested in this shadow that has crossed her path.

"I think he is very fond of brandy," says Dulce, reluctantly, and in a very grieved little tone. "Poor old Gregory!"

CHAPTER VI.

"Present mirth hath present laughter,
What's to come is still unsure."

SHAKESPEARE.

"JULIA is coming to-day," says Dulce, looking at them all, with the tea-pot poised in her hand. It is evident that this sudden announcement has hitherto been forgotten. "I heard from her this morning," she says, half apologetically, "but never thought of telling you until now. She will be here in time for dinner, and she is bringing the children with her."

"Only the children?" says Roger, the others are all singularly dumb.

"Yes. The *ayah* has gone home. Of course she will bring a nurse of some sort, but not Singa."

"For even small mercies we should be thankful," says Roger.

"Who is Julia?" asks Portia, idly.

"'Who is Julia? What is she
That all our swains commend her?
Holy, fair, and wise is she,
The heavens such grace——,'"

"Oh, that will do," says Dicky Browne, turning impatiently to Roger, who has just delivered himself of the above stanza.

"Don't be severe," says Dulce, reprovingly; "extravagant praise is always false, and as to the swains, that is what she *wants* them to do, only they won't."

"Now, who is severe?" says Roger triumphantly.

"As yet, you have hardly described her," says Portia.

"Let me do it," entreats Mr. Browne, airily, "I feel in the very vein for that sort of thing. She is quite a thing to dream of; and she is much too preciously utter, and quite too awfully too-too!"

"That's obsolete now," says Dulce, "quite out of the market altogether. Too-too has been superseded, you should tell Portia she is very-very!"

"Odious," says Roger, in a careful aside as though determined to think Miss Blount's speech unfinished.

"She is like Barbauld's *Spring*," put in Sir Mark, lazily, coming up to have his cup refilled. "She is the 'sweet daughter of a rough and stormy sire.' Do any of you remember old Charley Blount?"

Plainly, nobody does. Everybody looks at everybody else, as though *they* should have known him, but nothing comes of it.

"Well, he was just the funniest old thing," says Sir Mark, laughing, at some absurd recollection. "Well, he is gone now, and

> 'I know it is a sin
> For me to sit and grin
> At him here;
> But the old three-cornered hat
> And the breeches, and all that,
> *Were* so queer.'

"And bless me, what a temper he had," says Sir Mark, laughing again at his quotation. "His clothes and his temper were old Blount's principal features. Hideous old monster he was too."

"Is she hideous?" ask Portia.

"N-o. She is well enough; she isn't a bit like him, if we forget the clothes and temper. She says her mother was very beautiful."

"I never knew a woman whose mother wasn't beautiful, once the mother was dead," says Roger. "Sort of thing they tell you the moment they get the chance."

Five o'clock has struck some time ago. Evening is coming on apace. On the dry, smooth-shaven lawn, outside, the shadows are lengthening, stretching themselves indolently as though weary from all the hide-and-seek they have been playing, since early dawn, in the nooks and corners of the quaint old garden.

June has not yet quite departed; its soft, fresh glory still gilds the edge of the lake, and lends a deeper splendor to the golden firs that down below are nodding to the evening breeze; it is the happiest time of all the year, for

> "What is so rare as a day in June?
> Then, if ever, come perfect days;
> Then heaven tries the earth, if it be in tune,
> And over it softly her warm ear lays."

"Well, the mother is dead and gone now, this many a year," says Sir Mark, "and the old fellow went nearly out of his mind when Julia married Beaufort."

"Oh! she is married?" says Portia.

"Dear Portia, didn't I *tell* you she had children?" says Dulce, reproachfully. "She married an Indian Nabob with an aristocratic name and a *lac* of rupees, as she believed, but there was a flaw somewhere, and—er—how was it Dicky?"

"Simplest thing out," says Dicky. "He had a lack of rupees, indeed, as she found out when he died. It is only the difference of one letter after all, and that can't count for much."

"Her father, old Charley, left her everything, so she isn't badly off now," says Sir Mark, "but the Nabob was a sell."

"I wonder if Portia will like her," says Dulce, meditatively, laying her elbows on the table and letting her chin sink into her palms

"Tell me something about her personally," entreats Portia, turning to her with some show of interest.

"What can I tell you? She is pretty in her own way, and she agrees with everyone, and she never means a word she says; and, when she appears most earnest, that is the time not to believe in her; and she is very agreeable as a rule, and she is Fabian's pet aversion."

("Not now," says Portia to herself).

"I don't think there is anything else I can tell you," continues Dulce, with a little nod.

"I wonder you have her," says Miss Vibart, disagreeably impressed by this description.

"Why, she is our cousin! And, of course, she can come whenever she wishes—she knows that," says Dulce. "It is not with her, as with you, you know. You are a joy, she is a duty. But the children *are* so sweet."

"How many of them?" asks Portia, who knows a few things she prefers to children.

"Three. Pussy, Jacky, and the Boodie. The Boodie is nothing short of perfection."

"That is the one solitary point on which Dulce and I agree," says Roger. "We both adore the Boodie. Wait till you see her; she is all gold hair, and blue eyes, and creamy skin, and her nose is a fortune in itself. I can't think where Julia found her."

"Fabian is so fond of her," says Dulce, whose thoughts never wander very far from the brother for whose ruined life she grieves incessantly, day after day.

"How old is she?" asks Portia—"this little beauty you speak of—this harmony in blue and gold?"

"Five, I think. She is not in the least like her mother, who goes in for æsthetics, with a face like a French doll, and

who will love you forever, if you will only tell a lie, and say you think she resembles Ellen Terry."

"With a soul given entirely to French bonnets and Louis Quinze shoes, she would be thought ultra-mundane," says Sir Mark, who is trying to make Dulce's little toy terrier, Gilly, stand on his hind legs, in search of cake.

"My goodness! what a long word," says Dicky Browne, who is now eating bread and butter, because he has finished the cake. "Does it mean anything edible? Because if so, I don't quite follow you; *no* one could masticate Julia!"

"I hope she will be in a good temper when she comes," says Roger. "Last time she terrified us all into fits."

"If the children have behaved nicely in the train, and if anyone has taken any notice of her, she will be charming," says Dulce, moodily. "If not, she will be—the other thing."

"And the other thing isn't nice," puts in Dicky, in his pleasantest tone.

"Then what shall we do with her just at first?" says Miss Blount, who is evidently in fear of breakers ahead.

"Look here," says Mr. Browne, who couldn't hold his tongue to save his lite, "I'll tell you the first thing to say to any fellow who arrives at your house. Don't go worrying him about the health of his sister, and his cousins, and his aunts, but just ask him if he will have a B. and S. He *will*, you know—and—and there you are. He won't forget it to you afterwards."

Sir Mark laughs. Portia unfurls her fan, and smiles faintly behind it.

"Julia isn't a fellow, and I'm sure she wouldn't like brandy," says Dulce, who is feeling a little hopeless as she contemplates the coming of this new guest.

"The more fool she," says Dicky. "Try Madeira. then. She has a tenderness for Madeira; and tell her her hat is lovely. That'll fetch her."

"Come and sit here, Dicky," says Portia, motioning to the footstool near her. "Your advice is not to be surpassed."

"It's not so bad," says Mr. Browne, comfortably settling himself on the cushion at her feet, just as Fabian enters the room; "but I'm sorry she won't entertain the brandy idea. That never fails. It's friendly, homely, you know, and that."

"Dicky says if you drink rum and new milk every morning before breakfast, you will live forever," says Dulce, thoughtfully.

"What a miserable idea," says Fabian, in his usual soft voice, that has yet something stern about it. "It suggests the Wandering Jew, and other horrors. Who would live forever?"

"*I* would," says Dicky, with a sentimental glance at Portia, "if I might only remain here."

"Get up, Dicky, and don't make an ass of yourself," says Sir Mark, a little sharply for him, considering his natural laziness, and his tendency to let all things slide. As a rule he makes indolence his god, and sacrifices everything to it. Now, some superior influence compels him to make this speech, and to regard Dicky with a glance that bespeaks disfavor. Fabian is standing somewhat apart, his eyes as usual fixed upon the flickering shadows and the touch of green in the ocean beyond, but with his mind many leagues away Yet now he turns, and looks with wonder at Sir Mark, as though astonished at his tone, and Sir Mark looks at him. There is a certain amount of longing, and hope, and affection, in Sir Mark's glance.

"At all events she will be in time for our ball," says Roger, "and, besides that, there will be another element of amusement. Stephen Gower is coming back to the Fens at last. She can get up a little flirtation with him, and as he is a right-down good sort, I daresay, if I gave him the right cue, he would take her off our hands for a little while."

"Is your friend coming?" says Dulce, with some surprise. "You never told us. And that pretty place is to have a master at last? I am rather glad, do you know; especially as he is a friend, too, of Fabian's."

"I have no friends," says Fabian, suddenly, with a small frown.

"Oh yes, you have, whether you like it or not," says Gore, quickly. "I can swear to one at least. My dear fellow, this is one of your bad days; come with me; a walk through the evening dews will restore you to reason once more."

He passes his arm through Fabian's, and leads him down the balcony steps into the dew-steeped gardens. A moan from the sea comes up to greet them as they go. No other sound disturbs the calm of the evening air.

"I think Fabian has the most perfect face I ever saw," says Roger, suddenly. But Portia makes no reply. She is watching Fabian's figure as it disappears in the dusk. Dulce,

however, turns quickly, and looks at Roger, a strange gleam in her great, blue eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

"He is a fool who is not for love and beauty. I speak unto the young, for I am of them, and always shall be."—BAILEY.

SLOWLY, decorously, they march into church, one by one —Dulce first, and then Sir Christopher, and then Julia Beaufort and Portia, and so on, down to the children, who are evidently consumed with a desire to know more than seems, and who are evincing a dangerous longing to waltz up the smooth stone aisle.

The Boodie (who has not been overdrawn by Dulce and Roger, and who really *is* like an angel, with her sapphire eyes and corn-colored hair, and the big white bonnet, with its blue bow, that surrounds her face like a cloud) rather loses her presence of mind. It is either this, or a sudden accession of ambition, that overcomes her, because, without a moment's notice, she turns gently on her left heel, and executes a tiny pirouette on her small Hessian boots. A frown from her mother suppresses further evolutions, and, with a sigh, she returns to decorum and the family pew.

In a corner of it the children are comfortably stowed away, while all the others following suit, fall into their proper places. They are only barely in time. The organ plays them up the aisle, and they have only just a second to scramble through the preliminary prayers (so distinct a token of respectability), when the rector's voice breaks forth.

Portia, who has not been to church before, looks up at Mr. Grainger, while he is confessing everybody in a tone severe but bilious, and tells herself he is as like a superannuated old crow as ever he can be. He is flanked by the curate, a mediæval young man, with a pallid countenance and an irreproachable gown, cut in the latest fashion, who stands in an attitude of the most approved, with his eyes fixed immovably upon a side pillar. The fixity of his gaze is so intense as to suggest the idea that he never again means to remove it until death claims him for his own.

Then a hymn is sung by the village choir, led by the organist's high soprano. It is a hymn very unique in its way,

and sung with much fervor, if little tune, and pierces even to the brains of its hearers. The organ beats a solemn accompaniment to this delicacy, and whether the strains from the ancient instrument—that squeaks like a dilapidated bagpipes—is too much for the curate, I know not; but, at the last verse, he removes his eyes from the pillar of the church and concentrates them upon Portia.

Portia, at this particular moment, I regret to say, is smiling broadly. A brilliant smile that illuminates her whole face, rendering her as lovely as a dream. She is plainly deriving great consolation from the village choir?

The curate, smitten by the sight of her levity, or by the consciousness of his own lapse from the path of duty, in so far letting his mind wander to mundane matters, turns pale, and, lowering his eyes until they reach the tesselated pavement at his feet, grows sad and thoughtful, and perhaps decides on eating no meat again to-day as punishment for his fault.

The church is old, quaint, curious. It is like a thing forgotten. It looks as if it had been dug up by somebody and planted just here, no one knows why. The windows are narrow and elongated, and admit but little light. The pillars in the more distant corners are wrapt in gloom. A cobweb falling from the roof, spun by some enterprising spider, hangs over the gaunt pulpit, as though desirous of coming in contact with whosoever may enter it.

The cobweb, as it waves lazily backward and forward with every breeze that assails it, is a thing of joy to Roger and Dicky Browne, who are sitting side by side. It is an unspeakable boon, a sweet attraction, an everlasting resource to them throughout the service. As it goes to and fro their eyes follow it; they would willingly bet upon it were such a thing practicable; and they wait in a charmed suspense until such time as some one will enter the pulpit, to see whether the some one will attack the cobweb, or the cobweb attack the some one.

Besides the cobweb there is a clerk and a sexton. Sometimes they say Amen when the idea strikes them; sometimes they don't; it is awkward when they *don't*. Then a lull in the performance makes itself felt, though it is always somewhat broken by the voice of the curate, which is monotonous in the extreme.

A few stray sunbeams are straggling in through the narrow windows, and are holding high festival in Dulce's bonnet; a perfect crown of glory envelops her head. The day being exceptionally warm, everything and every one is drowsy and sleepy, and a trifle inattentive.

Meanwhile, the service progresses surely, if slowly. Uncle Christopher's head is courting his chest; Fabian, who always sits next to him, is unmistakably wide-awake, but has his head lowered, and his eyes fixed moodily upon the carpet at his feet. He looks attentive, but is really miles away from the Commandments and from everything.

Portia, in her white gown, is looking more than ordinarily lovely, and just now is gazing oddly at Fabian. She is vaguely wondering how he would look if he permitted himself to smile. He is always so preternaturally grave that she is curious to know if a smile—once indulged in—would imbitter or sweeten his face. Yes; Roger was quite right when he said the other day that Fabian's face was perfect. Perhaps even the smile she desires to see upon it could not improve it. Nay, it might even mar it, so severe are its lines; but were they *always* so? She is lost in impossible speculation!

Dulce, clad all in severe black, with her hands crossed upon her knees, like a small devotee, is looking straight before her at nothing particular, and is utterly unconscious that the strange young man in the "Fens" pew is regarding her with an amount of attention he has certainly not expended on his prayers.

The children have behaved wonderfully well, all things considered. The Boodie has only once laughed out loud, and only twice have Jacky and Pussy indulged in a deadly scuffle; altogether, there is deep cause for thankfulness.

The cobweb is still waving to and fro, and now (as Mr. Grainger ascends the stairs and enters the pulpit), driven, perhaps, by some stronger current of air, moves rapidly to the right, so that the rector reaches his place and arranges himself therein, without coming into collision with it, to Roger's and Dicky's everlasting chagrin.

"A narrow escape," says Dicky, in a careful undertone, to Roger, who, too, has been breathlessly watching the *denouement*.

"Yes, just like our dismal luck," responds that young man,

in an aggrieved tone. "I'd have bet anything on its catching him by the wig."

Mr. Grainger standing up, after a short and private prayer, looks as if he was making his bow to the audience, and having surveyed them leisurely for an embarrassing moment (during which the farmers' wives fidget, and look as if they would gladly inhabit their boots), he gives forth his text.

Silence ensues; the curate arranges himself in a purely ascetic attitude; the rector stamps his foot, in a preparatory sort of way, on the floor of the massive pulpit, which is as hideous as it is clumsy to the last degree. There are a few meagre little carvings all round it, suggestive of tares, and wheat, and good Samaritans, and there is an impossible donkey in the foreground. It is a very depressing pulpit, but certainly solid.

"No chance of a breakdown," says Roger, gloomily, fixing his eye-glass in his left eye, and surveying with ill concealed disgust the unwieldly structure before him.

"You're a brave boy," returns Mr. Browne, with exaggerated admiration. "Fancy your looking for excitement *here*."

"It may be nearer than you think," says Roger, *so* meaningly, that his companion applies himself to the translating of his glance. It is fixed, and fixed on the cobweb, too, which is slowly, slowly floating towards the rector's head. It comes nearer to it, catches in a rising lock (that has elevated itself, no doubt, because of the preacher's eloquence), and lingers there, as though bent on lifting pulpit, Grainger and all to the ceiling with the next puff of wind.

Roger forgets his grievance, his *ennui*, everything! The situation has its charm. To his delight he finds Dicky as wrapt in the possible result as himself. The cobweb sticks fast. Mr. Grainger, lifting his hand, smooths his ear, under the mistaken impression that the tickling feeling is there, and then goes on solemnly with his discourse, which is dryer than the weather, which is saying a good deal. He moves his head impatiently from side to side, but gains nothing by this, as the cobweb is apparently of an affectionate disposition, and goes with him wherever he listeth.

Dicky Browne is entranced. *Such* an interlude was more than he had hoped for. Involuntarily he lays his hand on Dulce's arm, and, giving her a mild pinch, shows her the cause of his apparent joy.

"If the flooring gives way he'll die the death of Absalom," he says, gravely, whereupon Miss Blount also, I grieve to say, gives way to silent but wild mirth.

The rector waxes warm. The cobweb, giving up the hair as a bad job, has relinquished its hold, and is now mildly touching his cheek, in a somewhat coquettish fashion. Mr. Grainger, with a short but decisive gesture, drags it, and its many yards of spider-workmanship to the ground. The cobweb and the spider suffer—but they have their revenge. Mr. Grainger is embarrassed with the cobweb, which has twined itself loving round his finger, and not until he has lost his place in his sermon and grown very red in the face, is serenity restored.

The rural congregation shows every symptom of being able to fall at a moment's notice into the arms of Morpheus. The curate grows leaner, more toil-worn, more ascetic. The rector drones away. The Boodie, having walked up and down the pew several times, has finally come to anchor in Uncle Christopher's arms, and having flung her little white bonnet from her, has now snuggled her head inside his coat, and is intently listening to what appears to be a very lengthened whisper from him. It seems to be a whisper without an end, and one undesirous of response. Indeed, there is a legend extant that Uncle Christopher employs his time during the sermon, whenever the Boodie is with him, in telling her tales of fairyland, not to be surpassed by Grimm or Andersen!

The rector bleats on incessantly; faintly and more faintly his voice seems to reach his flock. The sun beats with undying fervor upon the gables outside and the bald heads of the parishioners within. There is a great sense of quiet everywhere, with only the rector's voice to disturb it, when suddenly upon the startled ear falls a sound, ambiguous, but distinct.

It is a snore! An undeniable snore! and it emanates from Jacky! He has succumbed to heat and Mr. Grainger, and is now travelling in lands where we poor waking mortals cannot enter. Apparently he is happy, but he certainly is not as pretty as he need be, with his short and somewhat aggressive nose uplifted, and his mouth at its widest stretch.

Everyone in the pew gives a decided jump—be the same small or great—but Pussy alone finds herself equal to the

occasion. She is a child of extreme promise, and, seeing her opportunity, at once embraces it. She seizes Jacky mildly, but firmly, by the hair, and administers to him three severe shocks.

The result is everything she can possibly have desired Jacky, awakening, comes to his senses with the aid of a partially suppressed yell, and falling upon Pussy with an evident desire to exterminate her there and then, rolls with her off the seat, and disappears with her heavily under it.

An awful moment, fraught with agony for the survivors ensues: and then the belligerents are once more brought to light by Fabian; who, after much search and expostulation, restores them to their proper places. Being nearest to them, he plants them again upon their cushionss with only this precaution—that he himself now sits between them. This is hardly to their liking, and from their several positions, and right across poor Fabian's chest, they breathe fire and war, and death and destruction upon each other.

How it will all end everyone refuses to dwell upon; but, just at the most critical moment, Fabian, stooping his dark, grave face, whispers something to the irate little damsel that, as if by magic, reduces her to order.

She looks at him a little while, then sighs, and finally, slipping her hand through his arm, lays her blonde head against him, and is the personification of all things peaceful, until the service ends.

She looks up at him, too, as though desirous of his forgiveness, and Fabian, taking her slim little baby hand in his, assures her with a glance that she *is* forgiven; and then she smiles at him, and nestles a degree closer, and then Fabian, though always unsmilingly, passes his arm round the child, and draws her into a more comfortable position.

Portia, who has watched it all, feels a strange pang at her heart; it is as though he is glad to be friends with these children, to be at peace with them, because they, at least (sweet, trusting souls), believe in him. And what a tenderness he betrays towards them! this dark, moody, concentrated man, whose whole life is burdened with an unsavory mystery. What a power, too, he possesses over them; even that untractable Pussy was calmed, charmed into submission by a word, a glance. Yet children and dogs, they say, have keenest instincts!

While she still wonders, Fabian lifts his eyes and meets hers, and as though drawn by some magnetic influence each towards the other, though sorely against their wills, they gaze into each other's faces for more time than they care to calculate afterwards, until at last Fabian (who is the first to recover himself) lets his glance fall, and so the spell is broken.

After this, Portia sits quiet and thoughtful until the last Amen is uttered, and they all go eagerly, but with a meritorious attempt at regret, into the open air once more.

CHAPTER VIII.

"None here are happy, but the very fool,
Or very wise: I am not fool enough
To smile in vanities, and hug a shadow;
Nor have I wisdom to elaborate
An artificial happiness from pains."—YOUNG.

THEY are all standing in the porch, saying "How d'ye do" to half a dozen of their neighbors, and being introduced to the dark young man in the Fens pew. He is a very handsome young man, and very light-hearted apparently, and looks very frequently at Miss Blount, who smiles at him very graciously, and tells him he must "really come up to luncheon at the Court, or Uncle Christopher will be *so* disappointed. *Any* friend of Roger's"—and so on.

"Portia," says Sir Christopher, suddenly—when Stephen Gower has expressed his extreme pleasure at the thought of lunching at the Court, always with his dark eyes fixed curiously upon Dulce—"Come with me; I want to show you your poor mother's last resting-place."

"Ah! yes; I shall like to see that," says Portia, tenderly, though the dead mother is only a bare memory to her. "Yes, take me to see it."

They separate from the others, and go around an angle of the old church, and past an ivied corner, and so come to the quiet spot where stands the vault of the Blounts..

"It was too far to send her to the Vibarts' burying-place" says Sir Christopher; "at least we tried to think so, because we tried to keep her with *us*. And your father was dead. And at the very last, she murmured something about being laid beside her mother; poor, dear girl!" To Sir Christopher, Portia's mother has always been a girl, and a poor

soul. I think, perhaps, Portia's father had been "*breezy*" in the way of temper.

Then Portia asks many questions, trivial in themselves, yet of mighty interest to these two, to whom the dead had been dear. And the questions and answers occupy some time, insomuch that when at length they return to the church porch, they find the others have all disappeared, and the sexton preparing to lock the church door.

"Where have all my people gone to?" asks Sir Christopher of this functionary, in an elevated tone, the functionary being, as he himself would describe it, "hard of hearing." Whereupon they are informed that the "Court folk" went "away home through yon small iron gate," and into the woods beyond, and are now presumably sauntering lazily homeward beneath the shade of the spreading oaks and elms.

"Then we cannot do better than follow their example," says Sir Christopher, but almost before they come to the iron gate they see Fabian, who, unmindful of their presence, nay, rather, utterly unaware of it, is walking steadily, but slowly, onward, as though lost in thought.

Presently, hearing footsteps behind him, he turns, and seeing Portia, starts perceptibly, and comes to a stand-still.

"I thought you would all be at home long before this," he says, involuntarily. Involuntarily also his tone conveys the idea that his wish was "father to his thought." There is a note in it that is distinct disappointment. Portia lets her lids fall over her eyes, and lets her lips form themselves into an almost imperceptible smile. Plainly he had loitered in the churchyard in the fond hope of avoiding them all (her especially it may be), and here is the result.

"We thought the same of you," says Sir Christopher, cheerily, coming to the front bravely, "we believed you at the Court before this. Very lucky you aren't though, as I want you to see Portia home. I must go and interview Bowles about that boy of his—a duty I hardly admire."

"It is late now. If you delay any longer you will miss your luncheon," says Portia, hurriedly. Her face betrays unmistakable anxiety.

It is now Fabian's turn to smile, but his lips are rigid, and the commonest observer may read, that mirth of even the grimmest description is far from him.

"Luncheon, eh? I don't care a fig about luncheon," says Uncle Christopher, gaily, "unless I'm shooting, or that. No. Better see Bowles now if I am to see him at all. Sunday is his only visible day, I've been told. His '*At home*,' in fact—as all the rest of the week he lies in bed, and refuses to wash himself."

"Horrid man!" says Miss Vibart, merely for the sake of saying something. In reality had Bowles felt it his duty to lie a-bed all the year round, and never indulge in the simplest ablutions, it would not have given her a passing thought.

"On the Sabbath he rouses himself, and in a spotless shirt (washed by that idiot of a wife of his, who still will believe in him), and with a pipe in his mouth, he struts up and down the pavement before the door of his palatial residence," says Uncle Christopher. "I am sure to find him to-day."

"Let me go with you," says Portia, as a last resource. "I should like to be made acquainted with this incomparable Bowles." She smiles as she speaks, but the smile is somewhat artificial, and is plainly conjured up with difficulty for the occasion.

"Well, come," says Sir Christopher, who always says "yes," to every one, and who would encourage you warmly if you expressed a desire to seek death and the North Pole.

"It is quite impossible," says Fabian, quietly, not raising his voice, and not moving as he speaks. "Portia cannot go with you to Bowles' house. The man is insupportable."

Portia has her hand upon Sir Christopher's arm; her eyes are alight; something within her—some contradictory power—awakens a determination to see this Bowles. Yet it is hardly so keen a desire to see a man in a clean shirt and a "churchwarden" that possesses her, as a desire to circumvent the man who has opposed her expressed wish. Fabian, on his part, though pained, is equally determined that she shall not be brought face to face with the unpleasant Bowles. She has her eyes on him, but he has his on Sir Christopher.

"I should like to go with you," she says, in clear tones, taking no heed of Fabian's last remark; "I like country people, and strange village characters, and—and that." This is somewhat vague.

"You remember the last time Dulce went to see *Mrs.* Bowles?" says Fabian, who has caught Sir Christopher's eye

by this. Whatever Dulce may have endured during that memorable visit is unknown to Portia, but the recollection of it, as forced upon Sir Christopher's memory, is all-powerful to prevent her accompanying him on his mission to-day.

"Yes, yes. I remember," he says, hurriedly, "Bowles, as a rule, is not courteous. My dear child,"—to Portia—"*No*, you cannot, I regret to say, come with me. This man can be uncomfortable in many ways. You understand, eh? You wouldn't like him. People in shirt-sleeves, however clean, are always out of it, eh? There, good-by to both of you. Take her home, Fabian, and explain my absence to the others, especially to Roger's friend, that new young fellow, Gower, of the Fens."

So saying, he marched away to do battle with the objectionable Bowles, with his fine old shoulders well squared, and a world of defiance in his gait. There is no help for it! The two left behind feel this acutely, and Fabian pushing open the little iron gate, Portia goes down the stone steps and enters presently upon a wood all green, and soft and verdure-clad.

The trees are interlaced above their heads. Through them the calm, blue sky looks down in wonder, and sheds a scintillating radiance on their path.

> "In heat the landscape quivering lies,
> The cattle pant beneath the tree:"

No little kindly breath of air comes to break the monotony of the dead sultriness that lies on everything.

Portia sighs, and with a small, but expressive, gesture pushes her hat somewhat off her forehead. He is quick to notice the faintest sign of wrong in those with whom he associates, and now turning to her, says, gravely:

"Here, beneath the trees, where the sun cannot penetrate too severely, Dulce often takes off her hat. Take off yours."

"If you think it will do any good," says Portia, doubtfully; and as though fearful of seeming ungracious, she does take off her hat, and walks along beside him, bareheaded.

She is feeling sad and depressed. For the first time since her arrival she is wishing herself back again with Auntie Maud, who is anything but after her own taste. Yet to live on here in the shadow of a living lie is bitter to her, more bitter than she had ever supposed possible.

She had come down to the Court fully aware that Fabian (according to the lights of those with whom she had lived) was guilty of the crime imputed to him. He had always been discussed in her immediate circle with bated breath. as one who had eternally disgraced the good old name of Blount, and dragged it cruelly in the dust.

To be innocent and not to be able to prove one's innocence, had seemed (and even now does seem to Auntie Maud and her set) a thing not to be entertained for a moment. It would be *too* preposterous! He had rendered their name hideous, but he should not impose upon them with his absurd stories of utter ignorance. They believed he had wilfully committed the forgery, trusting he would never be discovered, because of the unfortunate similarity between his writing and that of Sir Christopher. But he had failed, in spite of his ingenuity, and had been found out; and. though none of the forged notes had been discovered in his possession (which only proved the more to his distant relatives that he possessed the cleverness of the practised schemer), still they one and all sat upon him in solemn conclave, and pronounced him outside the pale of respectability.

That Christopher should elect to leave the beautiful old Court to such a one seems little less than a crime to the "cousins and aunts." To leave it to a man shunned by the entire county (and very properly too!), a man ashamed to lift his head amongst his fellow men, and who had never tried to live down his disgrace or brave it out. In this fact—the certainty of his being pusillanimous about his accusation—lies the proof of his guilt, to them.

Portia is going over the whole sad story now again, while the sinner walks beside her. Once she lifts her eyes, and looks at him, and tells herself Roger was indeed right when he made much of his beauty. Yet Satan dwells in comely bodies! How sad that a face so inclined to nobility should be stamped with the lines of care, born of dishonor. Tears fill her eyes as she looks at him, and she turns her head quickly away, but not before he has seen and marked the signs of distress within her beautiful eyes. A spasm crosses his face; he recoils a little from her, as though fear possesses him. He frowns; and a curious light—half grief, half anger—grows upon him, and expresses itself upon his quiet lips. Something that is almost agony is in his eyes; truly though

the body can know grief, the "sorrows of the soul are graver still."

"What is it that has risen between us?" he asks, suddenly; there is something intense in his tone. "Have you?"—he pauses, and then goes on with an effort—"have you in your heart so utterly condemned me?"

They have come to a stand-still; and Fabian, as he asks this question, is standing with his back against a huge oak tree. his eyes fixed upon his companion. His face is as white as death.

She makes him no answer. A very fine shade of color, so faint as to be almost imperceptible, dyes her cheek for a moment and then vanishes as suddenly as it came, leaving her quite as pallid as he is himself.

"It is the most natural thing in the world to condemn," he goes on, somewhat excitedly. "It is only human. One feels how easy it is. If one hears a damning story about an acquaintance, a story almost unsupported, how readily one inclines to the cruel side. It is not worse in one than in another. We all have a touch of savagery about us—a thirst for blood. For the most part, if placed in a certain set number of circumstances, we all think and act alike. That we should be cast in one mould with the very commonest of our brethren is a humiliating thought, but strictly within the lines of truth. You *do* condemn me?"

He wishes to force her into saying so. She shrinks from him, and raises one hand to her throat, as though nervous and unhappy.

"I don't know," she says at last, in a low, hesitating tone. "I know nothing. Sometimes I don't even know myself."

"That is always a knowledge difficult of attainment," he says, slowly. "But about me, in your heart, you are *sure*. You believe you do know. You think me guilty." As he says the word he clenches one hand so firmly that the nails crush into the flesh.

"I would rather not talk about it," says Portia, faintly.

By a terrible effort he recovers himself; a quick breath, that is almost a sigh, escapes him.

"That, of course, shall be as you wish," he says, quietly; and, rousing himself, they walk on together beneath the branching elms, in silence, painful as it is prolonged.

Coming to a tiny stream (where he is compelled to offer

and she to accept, his hand to help her over), she glances at him, but her glance is not returned, and then she sees that he has forgotten her very existence, and is, in thought, miles away from her. He has entered into some ideal realm of his own—captured during his long years of isolation from the world.

As she is silently watching him and wondering, a dark figure, moving from between the shrubs that hide off one angle of the house, comes into their path, and, seeing them, makes a skulking movement to the right as though it would gladly escape observation.

"Good evening, Slyme," says Fabian, in a half kindly, half contemptuous tone. The old man murmurs something in return. His eyes refuse to meet Fabian's, his hands join each other, and rub palm to palm in an uneasy, shuffling fashion. His voice is husky and slightly uncertain. His dull old eyes roam from Fabian to Portia in an odd, questioning way, as if debating some strange matter. Yet, though looking at them, it is at their arms or chests he looks, rather than at their faces.

Portia (who had stopped when Fabian had) now turns a little to one side and plucks a flower lazily from a neighboring shrub, and sighs a little as if weary, and as if she would gladly be at home.

At this, Fabian, who is quick to notice anything concerning her, rouses himself from his prolonged stare at Gregory, and, noting the instability of the old man's gait, says, suddenly, with his dark gaze full upon him:

"Again!"

His tone this time is all contempt; no kindliness mingles with it. The old man seems to wither beneath it, and puts out his hands with a gesture suggestive of deprecation. Fabian, taking no notice of it, walks away from him, Portia gladly following.

Then the secretary's face changes. Standing in the centre of the pathway, he looks after their retreating figures with a half-drunken scrutiny, full of malice.

"Ay," he says, bitterly, beneath his breath, "as a dog I am in his sight! So he has destroyed his only hope this many a time!"

His head sinks into its old position on his chest, and with a muttered curse he continues his way.

Just as Portia ascends the stone steps that lead to the house, Fabian, by a gentle touch, detains her.

"Remember always this," he said slowly and with an attempt at calmness that is infinitely sad, "that I do not blame you."

Tears spring to her eyes. She is at least generous, and now a great longing to be able to believe in him, to be able to assure him of her unbounded faith in his honor possesses her. But, alas! faith is neither to be invoked nor purchased, and to lie to him, and tell him a soothing falsehood against her conscience would be worse than useless. The tears having gathered, two of them roll slowly down her cheeks. She turns hastily aside. Catching her hand he holds it for a short moment in his own.

"They at least are mine," he says, meaning the tears, his voice deeply agitated, and then she draws her hand from his, and an instant later, is lost to sight.

CHAPTER IX.

"Young hearts, bright eyes, and rosy lips are there,
And fairy steps, and light and laughing voices,
Ringing like welcome music through the air—
A sound at which the untroubled heart rejoices."

HON. MRS. NORTON,

PORTIA, dressed in *merveilleux* of a cream shade, with a soft, yellow rose in her hair, is looking her loveliest. She is a little languid after her walk, and a little *distraite*, but desirable beyond words. She is coquetting with her dinner, rather than eating it, and is somewhat uncomfortably conscious that Fabian's eyes are perpetually wandering in her direction.

Dicky Browne is talking gaily, and is devoting himself with an ardor worthy of a better cause to Julia Beaufort, who is chattering inanely about many things, and who is in her element, and a blood-colored gown.

They have all the conversation to themselves, these two, as the others are depressed, or rather impressed, by Sir Christopher's silence, who has one of his brooding fits upon him. Either the redoubtable Bowles disagreed with him, or he disagreed with Bowles, because clouds have crowned his brow since his return home.

Mrs. Beaufort by this time has got to Sardou's last comedy, and Dicky, who never heard of it or its author, comes to a conversational stand-still. This means uninterrupted quiet all round, as nobody else is saying anything. The footsteps of the solemn butler, and his equally solemn assistant, is all the sound one hears, and presently they all wake to the fact that something *must* be said, and *soon.*

"What wretched artichokes!" says Dulce, coming nobly to the front, with a laudable desire to fill up the yawning gap.

"Yes—melancholy," says Roger, backing her up, as in duty bound; "out of all heart, apparently."

At this weak attempt at a joke Dicky grins approvingly.

"I know few people so altogether sufficing as our Roger," he says patronizingly, addressing nobody in particular; and as nobody in particular appears to think it necessary to answer him, conversation once more languishes.

Sir Mark—who can always find resources in his dinner, whatever else may fail him—is placidly happy, so is Mrs. Beaufort, though, perhaps, she is a little sorry that her sleeves have not been made as tight as Portia's, and with the second puffing, which is certainly beyond all praise!

"What's this?" asks Sir Christopher, addressing the butler in a resigned tone, and looking at a round, soft mass that has just been laid before him.

"Suet dumpling, Sir Christopher," replies the butler, apologetically.

"Again!" says Sir Christopher, in an indescribable manner.

"Surely not *again*," repeats Dulce, with unpleasant animation. "It *can't* be that frightful thing *again*, after all I said to cook yesterday!"

"I'm afraid it is 'em," says the butler, very sadly.

"And this is the cook Miss Gaunt so highly recommended!" says Dulce, wrathfully. "Save me from my friends, say I; can't she make anything else, Martin?"

"This is a gooseberry tart, 'em," whispers the butler, respectfully, a faint shade of encouragement in his voice, laying that delicacy before her.

"That means sugar—lots of sugar," says Dicky Browne, who is sitting close to her. "I'm glad of that, I like lots of sugar."

Portia laughs.

"You are like my lord mayor's fool," she says; "you like everything that is sweet."

"I do," says Dicky, fondly; "that's why I like you."

"I think it was very wrong of Miss Gaunt to impose such a woman upon us," says Dulce, deeply aggrieved.

"Never trust an old maid," says Roger; "I spend my life giving you good advice, which you won't take; and such an old maid, too, as Miss Gaunt! She is as good (or as bad) as two rolled into one."

"She said she was a perfect treasure," exclaims Miss Blount, casting an indignant glance at him.

"Send her back her treasure, then, and tell her, as you are not selfish, you could not think of depriving *her* of her services."

"Is that a sample of your good advice?" asks she, with considerable scorn. "Besides, I can't; I have agreed with this woman to stay here for a month."

"Fancy suet dumplings every day for a month," says Dicky Browne, unfeelingly; "that means four weeks—thirty-one days! We shall be dead, I shouldn't wonder, long before that."

"No such luck," says Sir Mark.

"Give her anything she wants, Dulce, and send her away," says Sir Christopher.

"But she will think me so unkind and capricious," protests Dulce, who is an arrant little coward, and is afraid to tell cook she no longer requires her. The cook is a big Scotchwoman, with very large bones, and a great many of them.

"Well, do whatever you like," says Uncle Christopher, wearily.

The night is fine, calm, and cool, and sweet with many perfumes. Some of them at table cast lingering glances at the lawn without, and long, silently, to be standing on it. The moon has risen, and cast across it great streaks of silver light that brighten and darken as clouds race each other o'er Astarte's sacred brow.

There is great silence on the air, broken only by a "murmuring winde, much like the sowne of swarming bees." A little rivulet in the far distance runs musically.

"Let us all go out," says Julia Beaufort, suddenly, feeling she has already spent quite too long a time over her biscuit and claret.

"Ah! thank you," says Portia, quickly, turning to her almost before she had finished speaking—her great, soft eyes even larger than usual. "I have been so longing to say that for the last five minutes."

"The 'lost chord' has been struck again," says Dicky Browne. "Mrs. Beaufort, I won't be deserted in this bare-faced fashion. If you are determined to court death through night dews, *I* shall court it with you."

Julia simpers, and looks delighted. Then they all rise from the table, and move towards the balcony; all—that is—except Sir Mark, who (though he would have dearly liked to accompany them into the mystic moonlight) still lingers behind to bear company with Sir Christopher, and strive to lay the ghost that so plainly is haunting him to-night.

Joyously they all descend the steps, and then break into a little run as their feet touch the velvet grass. The sky is bright with pale blue light, the air is soft and warm as sultry noon. A little baby wind—that ought to be in bed, so sweet and tender it is—is roaming here and there amongst the flowers, playing with the scented grasses, and losing itself amongst the bracken, lower down.

One can hear the roar of the distant ocean breaking itself against the giant rocks; one can hear, too, in strange contrast, the chirp, chirp of the green grasshopper.

As they come within view of the fountain, all their mouths form themselves into many round Os, and they say, "Ah!" as with one breath.

The scene is indeed charming beyond description. The water of the fountain is bright as silver, great patches of purest moonlight lying on it as calm as though in death. The water-lilies tremble faintly, as it might be in terror of the little gods who are leaning over them. A shadow from the trees in the background falls athwart a crouching Venus. Some pretty. low chairs are standing scattered about, and Portia sinking into one, the others all follow her example, and seating themselves on chairs on the soft sward begin to enjoy themselves.

The men produce cigars, and are presently happy in their own way. Roger or Dicky asks every one, indiscriminately, if she would like a cigarette; a question responded to in the negative by all, though in truth Dulce would have dearly liked one.

Fabian, who has come with them, is lying full length upon the grass, with his hands behind his head, gazing dreamily at the glimpse of the far-off sea, that shows through the dark-green firs. Dulce's silvery laugh is waking an echo lower down. There is a great sense of rest and happiness in the hour.

A big, lazy bumblebee, tumbling sleepily into Portia's lap, wakes her into life. It lies upon her, looking larger and blacker than its wont, as it shows against the pallor of her gown. She starts, and draws herself up with a half-suppressed cry.

Fabian, lifting the bee from her knees, flings it high into the air, and sends it off on the errand it was probably bound on before it fell in love with Portia.

"How foolish of me to be frightened of it—pretty thing," she says, with a faint blush. "How black it looked."

"*Every* thing frightens me," says Julia Beaufort pensively, "*everything!*"

"Do I?" asks Dicky Browne, in a tone full of abject misery. "Oh! *say* I don't."

"I meant insects you know, and frogs, and horrid things like that," lisps Julia. "And they always will come flying round one just on a perfect night like this, when"—sentimentally—"Nature is wrapt in its profoundest beauty!"

"I don't think I ever saw a frog fly," says Dicky Browne, innocently. "Is it nice to look at? Is it funny?"

"No! its only silly—like you!" says Dulce throwing a rose-bud at him, which he catches dexterously.

"Thank you," he says, meekly, whether for the speech or the flower, he leaves vague.

"Stephen Gower is coming over here to-night," says Roger suddenly.

"To-night Why didn't you ask him to dinner?" asks Dulce, a note of surprise in her tone.

"I did ask him, but, for some reason I now forget, he could not come. He confessed he was lonely, however, in that big barn of a house, and said he would feel deeply grateful if you would permit him to drop in later on. I said you would; and advised him to drop in by all means, though how people do that has always been a puzzle to me."

"Who is Stephen Gower?" asks Portia, curiously, of no one in particular. She is leaning back in her chair, and is fanning herself languidly.

"He is Roger's *Pylades Achates*—his second self—his very soul!" says Dicky Browne, enthusiastically. "He is a thing apart. We must, in fact, be careful of him, lest he break. At least so I have been told."

"I thought you knew him, too," says Dulce. "I always believed you and Roger, and this wonderful Stephen Gower, were all at college together."

"You wronged Dicky, albeit unwittingly," says Mr. Dare, taking his cigar from between his lips to give more emphasis to his words. "We at Cambridge were too frivolous for such superior beings as Dicky. It was at Oxford he commenced his honorable career; it was there he indulged in those high hopes of future fame that have been so splendidly realized in his maturer years."

"Don't kick me when I'm down," says Dicky, pathetically. "I couldn't help it—and at least I have *had* my hopes. That must be always something. It's any amount soothing, do you know, to look back upon your past, and remember what a jolly ass you once were."

"I can't imagine your ever having had hopes of future fame," says Dulce, laughing.

"Well I had, do you know, any amount of 'em. In the early dawn, when I was awake—which, perhaps, wasn't so often as it sounds, except when I was returning from—er—a friend's house. I used to sit up with them, you know, whenever they had scarla"—

"Oh yes, *we* know," interrupts Roger, most unfeelingly.

"Well, in the early dawn," continues Dicky, quite unmoved, "when the little birds were singing, I used to think I could be happy as General Sir Richard Browne, at the head of a gallant corps, with a few darkies in the foreground fleeing before my trusty blade. By breakfast time, however, all that would be changed, and I would glory in the belief that one day would see me seated on the wool-sack. By dinner-time I was clothed in sanctimonious lawn; and long before the small hours, I felt myself a second Drake, starting to conquer another Armada, only one even *more* Invincible."

They all laugh at him. And then he laughs at himself, and seems, indeed, to enjoy the joke even more than they do.

"I don't care," he says, at length, valiantly; "no, not a single screw. I haven't *done* anything, you know.

"Oh yes, you have, a lot in your time," murmurs Roger, supportingly.

"But I must come in for the title and the estate when the old boy, my cousin, 'shuffles off this mortal coil,' and in the meantime the governor stands to me decently enough, and I'm pretty jolly all round."

"Tell us about Stephen Gower," says Dulce, after a pause. "He interests me, I don't know why. What is he like?"

"He is

> 'A greenery yallery
> Grosvenor gallery
> Foot-in-the-grave young man.'"

quotes Dicky, gaily.

"An æsthetic! Oh! I *do* hope not," exclaims Dulce, in a horrified tone.

"Have they pursued me even down here?" asks Portia, faintly. "I thought, I *hoped*, they were plants indigenous to London soil alone."

"He is nothing of the sort," says Roger, indignantly. "He is about the best fellow I know. He would be ashamed to go round (like those idiots you speak of) with flowers and flowing locks. He leaves all that sort of thing"—contemptuously—"to girls."

"Who is talking of Stephen Gower?" asks Sir Mark, coming towards them over the path of moonlight that lies upon the smooth lawn. "Happy man to be discussed by so fair a trio, 'beneath the sweet-smelling starlight,' as James has it."

"Bless me," says Dicky, "I had no idea dry monopole would have had such an effect on Gore. He is talking poetry, I think; I never could understand it myself. Now for example, about those stars—*do* they smell? *I* never noticed it. What's it like, Gore?"

Everyone disdains to take notice of this sally—all, that is, except Dulce, who is always only too delighted to laugh whenever the barest chance of being able to do so presents itself.

Roger, crossing over to where she sits, leans his arms on the back of her chair, and bends his face to hers.

"Look here," he says, in the conciliatory tone of one who is going to make a request and is not quite sure it will be granted. "If Gower comes down by-and-by, I wish you

would promise me to be good to him. He is a very old chum of mine, and a very good fellow, and—be civil to him, will you?"

"What do you suppose I am going to do to him?" asks Miss Blount, opening her eyes. "Was I bad to him at luncheon? Are you afraid I shall bite him? I shan't. You may be happy about that."

"Of course—I know; but I want you to be *particularly* nice to him," goes on Roger, though faintly discouraged by her tone. (Now what did he mean by saying she *wouldn't* bite him. It sounds as if she would bite me!) "He is the oldest friend I have; and—er—as we are to be married some time or other, I want him to like you very much."

"Who are to be married? You and Mr. Gower? It sounded like it," says Dulce, wilfully.

"I was thinking of you and myself," he says, a little gravely.

"Well, what is it you want me to do?" asks she, moving restlessly in her seat. She is, in spite of herself, disturbed by his gravity. "Am I to make love to him, or am I to let him make love to me? Your devotion to this old friend is quite touching."

"He would be very unlikely indeed to make love to you," replies Roger, rather stiffly. "He understands perfectly how matters are between you and me."

"Oh, no doubt," says Miss Blount, disgustedly. "Everyone seems to know all about this *absurd* engagement. I can't think how I was ever brought to consent to it."

"*Absurd!*" says Mr. Dare, in an impossible tone.

"Yes, *painfully* absurd! Quite too ridiculous," with unpleasant force.

"Oh!" says Mr. Dare.

"Yes," says Dulce, still defiant, though a little ashamed of herself, "it is quite enough to make people *hate* people, all this perpetual gossip."

"You are at least honest," he says, bitterly.

Silence.

Dulce, whose tempers are always short-lived, after a little reflection grows very repentant,

Turning to him, she lays her little hand on his, as it still rests on the arm of her chair, and says, softly:

"I have been cross to you. Forgive me. I did not quite

mean it. Tell me again what you want me to do about your friend."

"It was only a little matter," says Roger, in a low tone, "and it was, I think, the first favor I ever asked of you; and I thought, perhaps—"

He pauses. And raising himself from his lounging position, on her chair, moves as though he would go away from her, having abandoned all hope of having his request acceded to.

But as he turns from her, her fingers tighten upon his, and so she detains him.

"What is it now?" he asks, coldly, trying to keep up his dignity, but as his glance meets hers, he melts. And, in truth, just now she could have thawed a much harder heart, for on her *mignon* face sits one of her very loveliest smiles, conjured up for Roger's special benefit.

"Don't go away," she entreats, prettily, "and listen to me. I shall be charming to your friend. I shall devote myself exclusively to him if it will please you; and if only to prove to you that I *can* grant you a favor."

"Thank you," says Roger gratefully. Then he regards her meditatively for a moment, and then says, slowly:

"Don't be too kind to him."

"Could I?" says Dulce, naively.

He laughs a little, and, bending his head, presses his lips to the little slender hand that still rests within his own.

The caress is so unusual that Dulce glances at him curiously from under her long lashes. A faint, pink glow creeps into her cheeks. She is surprised; perhaps, too, a little pleased, because once again this evening she bestows upon him a smile, soft and radiant.

Mr. Browne is rambling on in some incoherent fashion to Julia Beaufort. Sir Mark is telling Portia some quaint little stories. Fabian is silently listening to them stretched at Portia's feet.

The last glimpse of day has gone. "Death's twin sister, Sleep," has fallen upon the earth. One by one the sweet stars come out in the dusky vault above, "spirit-like, infinite."

In amongst the firs that stand close together in a huge clump at the end of the lawn, great shadows are lying, that stretching ever and ever further, form at last a link between the land and the sea.

"Ah! here you are, Stephen," says Sir Mark, addressing

the languid young man they had met in the morning, who is coming to them across the grass. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

"They wouldn't give me any dinner until about an hour ago," says the languid young man in a subdued voice. He glances from Portia to Julia Beaufort, and then to Dulce. There his glance rests. It is evident he has found what he seeks.

"Dulce, I think I told you Stephen Gower was coming to-night," says Roger, simply. And then Dulce rises and rustles up to him, and filled with the determination to keep sacred her promise to be particularly nice to Roger's friend, holds out to him a very friendly hand, and makes him warmly welcome.

Then Portia makes him a little bow, and Julia simpers at him, and presently he finds himself accepted by and admitted to the bosom of the family, which, indeed, is a rather nondescript one. After a few moments of unavoidable hesitation, he throws himself at Dulce's feet, and, leaning on his elbow, tells himself country life, after all, isn't half a bad thing.

"What a heavenly night it is," says Dulce, smiling down on him, still bent on fulfilling her word to Roger. Perhaps she is hardly aware how encouraging her smile can be. "See the ocean down there," pointing with a rounded, soft, bare arm, that gleams like snow in the moonlight, to where the sea is shining between the trees. "How near it seems, though we know it is quite far away."

"It is nearer to you than I am," says Mr. Gower, in a tone that might imply the idea that he thinks the ocean in better care than himself.

"Well, not just now." says Dulce, laughing.

"Not just now," returns he, echoing her laugh. "I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies; but I wish the Fens was a little nearer to this place than it is."

"Portia, can you see Inca's Cliff from this?" asks Dulce, looking at her cousin. "You remember the spot where we saw the little blue flowers yesterday, that you so coveted. How clearly it stands out now beneath the moonbeams."

"Like burnished silver," says Portia, dreamily, always with a lazy motion wafting her black fan to and fro. "And those flowers—how I longed for them, principally, I suppose, because they were beyond my reach."

"Where are they," asks Roger. "I never remember seeing blue flowers there."

"Oh! *you* wouldn't notice them," says his *fiancée*, a fine touch of petulance in her tone, that makes Gower lift his head to look at her; "but they were there nevertheless. They were the very color of the Alpine genitian, and so pretty. We quite fell in love with them, Portia and I, Portia especially; but we could not get at them, they were so low down."

"There was a tiny ledge we might have stood on," says Portia, "but our courage failed us, and we would not try it."

"And quite right, too," says Sir Mark. "I detest people who climb precipices and descend cliffs. It makes my blood run cold."

"Then what made you climb all those Swiss mountains, two years ago?" asks Julia Beaufort, who has a talent for saying the wrong thing, and who has quite forgotten the love affair that drove Sir Mark abroad at that time.

"I don't know," replies he, calmly; "I never shall, I suppose. I perfectly hated it all the while, especially the guides, who were more like assassins than anything else. I think they hated me, too, and would have given anything to pitch me over some of the passes."

Portia laughs.

"I can sympathize with you," she says. "Danger of any sort has no charm for me. Yet I wanted those flowers. I think"—idly—"I shall always want them, simply because I can't get them."

"You shall have them in three seconds if you will only say the word," says Dicky Browne, who is all but fast asleep, and who looks quite as like descending a rugged cliff as Portia herself.

"I am so glad I don't know the 'word,'" says Portia, with a little grimace. "It would be a pity to endanger a valuable life like yours."

Dulce turns to Mr. Gower.

"You may smoke if you like," she says, sweetly. "I know you are longing for a cigarette or something, and *we* don't mind."

"Really though?" says Gower.

"Yes, really. Even our pretty town-lady here," indicating Portia, "likes the perfume in the open air."

"Very much indeed," says Portia, graciously, leaning a little toward Gower, and smiling sweetly.

"A moment ago I told myself I could not be happier," says Stephen, glancing at Dulce. "And indeed I wanted nothing further—but if I may smoke—if I have your permission to light this," producing a cigar, "I shall feel that my end is near; I shall know that the gods love me, and that therefore I *must* die young."

As he places the cigar between his lips he leans back again at Dulce's feet with a sigh suggestive of unutterable bliss.

"We were talking about you just before you came," says Dulce, with a little friendly nod, bending over his recumbent form, and making him a present of a very adorable smile. "We had all, you know, formed such different opinions about you."

"What was your opinion," asks he, rising to a sitting posture with an alacrity not to be expected from a youth of his indolence. In this last attitude, however, it is easier to see Dulce's charming face. "I *should* like to know that."

His manner implies that he would not like to hear the opinion of the others.

"It was nothing very flattering, I am afraid," said Dulce, with a little laugh. "I was—to confess the truth—just in the very faintest degree nervous about you."

"About *me!*"

"Yes," she laughed softly again; "I thought you might be a 'blue-and-white young man,' and that idea filled me with dismay. I don't think I like a 'soul-ful eyed young man,' *too* much."

"I'm so glad I'm of the 'threepenny 'bus' lot," says Gower, with a smile. "Ye gods! what a shocking thought is the other. Look at my hair, I entreat you, Miss Blount, and tell me does it resemble the lanky locks of Oscar?"

"No, it is anything but wylde," says Dulce, glancing at his shaven crown, that any hermit might be proud of: "and do you know I am glad of your sanity; I should quite hate you if you were a disciple of that school."

"Poor school," says Gower, pityingly, "for the first time I feel deep sympathy for it. But with regard to myself, I am flattered you troubled yourself to think of me at all. Did it really matter to you what my convictions might be?"

"Yes, of course," says Dulce, opening her eyes, and show-

ing herself half in fun, half in earnest, and wholly desirable. "Such a near neighbor as you must be. I suppose we shall see a good deal of you—at least"—sweetly—"I hope we shall; and how would it be with us if you called here every morning with lanky tresses, and a cadaverous face, and words culled from a language obsolete?"

This little speech quite dazzles Gower. Not the sauciness of it, but the undercurrent of kindliness. "*Every* morning!" Does she really mean that he may come up to this enchanting spot every morning?

It had, of course, occurred to him, during prayers, in the early part of the day, when he had sat out the dreary service with exemplary patience, and his eyes fixed on the Blount pew, that, perhaps, he might be allowed to call once a week at the Hall, without being considered by the inmates an absolute nuisance—but every day! this sounds too good to be true, and is, therefore, received by him with caution.

"You needn't be afraid of me," he says, apropos of Dulce's last remark. "I can speak no language but my own, and that badly."

"What a comfort," says Miss Blount. She is now wondering if she has done her duty by her new guest, and if she has been everything to him that she ought to have been, considering her promise to Roger.

"Where is Fabian?" she asks, suddenly, peering through the dusky gloom. "Are you there, darling?"

But no one answers her. It seems to them, that, tiring of their company, he has betaken himself to solitude and the house, once more. No one has seen him go, but, during the last few minutes, a gray black cloud has been slowly wandering over the pale-faced moon, and forms and features have been more indistinct. Perhaps Portia, who is sitting on the outer edge of the group, might have noticed his departure, but, if so, she says nothing of it.

Time runs on. Some one yawns, and then tries vainly to turn it into a sigh. The bell from some distant steeple in the little slumbering village far below in the plain, tolls slowly, solemnly, as though to warn them that eleven more hours have slipped into the great and fathomless sea of Eternity.

"Ah! so late!" says Dulce, with a little start. "How swiftly time has gone to-night. I never knew it fly with such hot haste. That proves I have been happy, does it not?"

She smiles down upon Mr. Gower, who is still at her feet, and he smiles up only too willingly at her.

At this moment a dark figure emerges from amongst the moaning firs, and comes toward them. In the uncertain and somewhat ghostly light it appears of an unusually large size. Dulce draws her breath a little quickly, and Julia, feeling her duty lies in this direction, gives way to a dainty scream. Portia, whose eyes have been upon this new comer for a full minute before the others noticed him, only turns her head away, and lets it sink a degree more lazily into the cushion of her chair.

The firs mounting high into the sky, stand out boldly against their azure back-ground. Fabian, in answer to Julia's touch of affectation, advances with more haste, and says:

"It is only me," in his usual clear, slow voice.

Passing by Portia's chair, he drops into her lap a little bunch of dark blue flowers.

"Ah!" she says quickly, then checks herself. Taking up the deeply-dyed blossoms, she lays them in her pink palm, and, bending her face over them, examines them silently. Sir Mark, regarding her curiously from the background, wonders whether she is thinking of them or of their donor.

"Why, those are the flowers we were talking about," says Dulce, with a faint contraction of her brows. "Fabian! Did you risk your life to get them?"

"Your life!" says Portia, in an indescribable tone, and as if the words are drawn from her against her will. I think she had made up her mind to keep utter silence, but some horror connected with Dulce's hasty remark has unbound her lips. She turns her eyes upon him, and he can see by the moonlight that her face is very white.

"My dear fellow," says Sir Mark, "you grow more eccentric daily. Now this last act was rashness itself. That cliff is very nearly impassable, and in this uncertain light—"

"It was the simplest thing in the world," says Fabian, coldly. "There was the ledge Dulce told you of, and plenty of tough heather to hold on by. I assure you, if there was the smallest danger, I should not have attempted it. And, besides, I was fully rewarded for any trouble I undertook. The view up there to-night is magnificent."

To Portia it is an easy matter to translate this last remark. He is giving her plainly to understand that he neither seeks

nor desires thanks from *her*. The view has sufficed him. It was to let his eyes feast upon the glorious riches nature had spread before him that led him up the mountain-side, not a foolish longing to gratify her whim at any cost to himself.

She looks at the flowers again, and with one taper finger turns them over and over in her hand.

"Well, good people," says Sir Mark, rising to his feet, "as it is eleven o'clock, and as the dew is falling, and as you are all plainly bent on committing suicide by means of rheumatism, neuralgia and catarrhs generally, I shall leave you and seek my virtuous couch."

"What's a catarrh?" asks Dicky Browne, confidentially, of no one in particular.

"A cold in your nose," replies Roger, uncompromisingly.

"I thought it was something to play on," says Mr. Browne unabashed.

"Dear me! Is it really eleven?" asks Julia. "I should never have thought it,"—in reality she thought it was twelve —"why did you not tell me?"—this to the attentive Dicky, who is placing a shawl round her shoulders—"you must have known."

"'With thee conversing I forget all time,'" quotes that ardent personage, with a beautiful smile. "I thought it was only nine."

Even with this flagrant lie Julia is well pleased.

"Dulce, tuck up your gown, the grass is really wet," says Roger, carelessly, "and put this round you." He goes up to her, as he speaks, with a soft white scarf in his hands.

"Thank you; Mr. Gower will put it on for me," says Dulce, rather more wilfully than coquettishly handing the wrap to Stephen, who takes it as if it were some sacred symbol, and, with nervous care, smothers her slender figure in it. Roger, with a faint shrug, turns away, and devotes his attentions to Sir Mark.

Portia, still with the flowers in her hand, has wandered away from the others, and entering the drawing-room before they have mounted the balcony steps, goes up to a mirror and regards herself attentively for a moment.

A little gold brooch, of Indian workmanship, is fastening the lace at her bosom. She loosens it, and then raises the flowers (now growing rather crushed and drooping) as if with the evident intention of placing them, by means of the brooch, against her neck.

Yet, even with her hand half lifted she hesitates, glances at her own image again; and finally, turning away, leaves the brooch empty.

Fabian, entering the drawing-room at this moment with the others, has had time to notice the action, the hesitation, everything.

Then comes bed hour. The men prepare to go to the smoking-room—the women think fondly of their own rooms and their maids.

Fabian, lighting a candle, takes it up to Portia. They are all standing in the hall now, beneath the light of the hanging lamps. She smiles her thanks without letting her eyes meet his, and lets him place the candle in her left hand.

"Have you hurt this?" he asks, lightly touching her right hand as he speaks.

"No." She pauses a moment, and then, slowly opening her closed fingers, shows him the blue flowers lying therein.

"They are lovely," she says, in a low tone, "and I *did* wish for them. But never—*never*—do that again."

"Do what again?"

"Endanger your life for me."

"There was no danger—and you had expressed a wish for them."

CHAPTER X.

"Every one is as God made him, and oftentimes a great deal worse!"
MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

WITH a continuous sob and a roar from the distant ocean the storm beats on. All night it has hurled itself upon path and lawn with impotent fury; towards morning it still rages, and even now, when noonday is at its height, its anger is not yet expended.

The rain falls in heavy torrents, the trees bow and creak most mournfully, the rose leaves—sweet-scented and pink as glowing morn—are scattered along the walks, or else, lifted high in air by vehement gusts of wind, are dashed hither and thither in a mazy dance full of passion and despair.

"Just three o'cloek," says Dulce, drearily, "and what weather!"

"It is always bad on your day," says Julia, with a carefully suppressed yawn. Julia, when yawning, is not pretty.

"I remember when I was here last year, that Thursday, as a rule, was the most melancholy day in the week."

Indeed, as she speaks, she looks more than melancholy, almost aggrieved. She has donned her most sensational garments (there is any amount of red about them) and her most recherché cap to greet the country, and naught cometh but the rain.

"I don't know anything more melancholy at any time than one's at-home day," says Dicky Browne, meditatively, and very sorrowfully; "It is like Sunday, it puts every one out of sorts, and creates evil tempers all round. I never yet knew any family that didn't go down to zero when brought face to face with the fact that to-day they must receive their friends."

"Its a pity you can't talk sense," says Dulce, with a small curl of her upper lip.

"It's a pity I *can*, you mean. I am too above-board, too genuine for the times in which we live. My candor will be my ruin!" says Mr. Browne, hopelessly unabashed.

"It will!" declares Roger, in a tone that perhaps it will be wise not to go into.

"I suppose nobody will come here to-day," says Portia, somewhat disappointedly; they have been indoors all day, and have become so low in spirit, that even the idea of possible visitors is to be welcomed with delight.

"Nobody," returns Sir Mark, "except the Boers and Miss Gaunt, and *they* are utter certainties; they always come; they never fail us; they are thoroughly safe people in every respect."

"If Miss Gaunt inflicts herself upon us to-day (which the gods forbid), be sure you pitch into her about the cook she sent you," says Roger, gloomily, turning to Dulce. "That will be a topic of conversation at all events; you owe me a debt of gratitude for suggesting it."

"Well I shan't pay it," says Miss Blount, with decision.

"Well you *ought*. As a rule, the attempts at conversation down here are calculated to draw tears to the eyes of any intellectual person."

"But why?" asks Portia, indolently.

"It is utterly simple," says Roger, mildly. "There is nothing to talk about; you cannot well ask people what they had for dinner yesterday, without being rude, and there are no theatres, or concerts, or clubs to discuss, and nobody ever

dies (the country is fatally healthy), and nobody ever gets married (because there is nobody to marry), and nothing is ever born, because they were all born years ago, or else have made up their minds never to be born at all. It is, in fact, about as unsatisfactory a neighborhood as any one could wish to inhabit."

"I dare say there are worse," says Dulce.

"You have strong faith," retorts Roger.

"Well, it would be a nice question to decide," says Sir Mark, amiably, with a view to restoring order.

"I don't think it is half a bad place," says Dicky Browne, genially, addressing nobody in particular, and talking for the mere sake of hearing his own voice.

"Dicky, I love you," says Dulce, triumphantly.

"Lucky Dicky," says Roger, with an only half-suppressed sneer, which brings down upon him a withering glance from his betrothed.

"How I hate rain," she says, pettishly, tapping the window with two impatient little fingers.

"I love it," says Roger, unpleasantly.

"Love rain!" with an air of utter disbelief. "How can you make such a ridiculous remark! I never heard of *any* one who liked rain."

"Well, you hear of me now. *I* like it."

"Oh! nonsense," says Miss Blount, contemptuously.

"It *isn't* nonsense!" exclaims he, angrily, "I suppose I am entitled to my own likes and dislikes. You can hate rain as much as you do *me* if you wish it; but at least allow me to—"

"Love it, as you do me," with an artificial laugh, and a soft shrug of her rounded shoulders. "It is perfectly absurd, in spite of your obstinate determination to say you do, I don't believe you *can* have a desire for wet weather."

"Thank you!" indignantly. "That is simply giving me the lie direct. I must say you *can* be uncivil when you choose."

"Uncivil!"

"Decidedly uncivil, and even more than that."

"What do you mean! I insist on knowing what you mean by more."

"They're at it again," says Mr. Browne, at this auspicious moment, waving his hand in an airy fashion in the direction of our two belligerents.

Mr. Browne is a person who can always say and do what he likes for several reasons, the principal being that nobody pays the smallest attention to either his sayings or doings. Everybody likes Dicky, and Dicky, as a rule, likes everybody. He has a father and a home somewhere, but where (especially with regard to the former), is vague.

The home, certainly, is kept up for nobody except the servants, as neither Dicky nor his father ever put in an appearance there. The latter (who has never yet mastered the fact that he is growing old), spends all his time in the favorite window of his Club in Pall Mall. with his nose pressed against the pane and his attention irrevocably fixed upon the passers-by on the other side of the way. This is his sole occupation from morning till night; unless one can take notice of a dismal and most diabolical tattoo that at unfortunate moments he is in the habit of inflicting upon the window, and the nerves of the other occupants of the room in which he may be.

Dicky puts in most of his time at Blount Hall. Indeed, it has grown to be a matter of speculation with the Blount's whether in the event of his marriage he will not elect to bring his bride also to stay with them for good and all! They have even gone so far as to hope he will marry a *nice* girl, and one whom they can receive in the spirit of love.

"I don't think they really ever quite enjoy themselves, until they are on the verge of bloodshed," says Sir Mark, in answer to Dicky's remark. "They are the very oddest pair I ever met."

All this is said quite out loud, but so promising is the quarrel by this time, that neither Dulce nor Roger hear one word of it.

"You do it on purpose," Dulce is saying in a tone in which tears and extreme wrath fight for mastery, "You torment me from morning till night. You are both rude and unkind to me. And now—*now*—what is it you have just said?"

"What have I said?" asks Roger, who is plainly frightened.

"What indeed! I should be ashamed to repeat it. But I know you said I was uncivil, and that I told lies, and any amount of things that were even worse."

"What on earth is the matter now with you two chil-

dren?" asks Sir Mark, coming for the second time to the rescue.

"I'm sure *I* don't know," says Roger, desperately. "It was all about the rain, I think. She is angry because I like it. How can I help that? I can't be born again with other preferences just to oblige *her*."

"There is some comfort in *that* thought," says Miss Blount, vindictively. "One of you in a century is *quite* sufficient."

"Oh! come now, Dulce," protests Sir Mark, kindly. "You don't mean that, you know. And besides only pretty speeches should come from pretty lips."

"Well, he does nothing but tease me," says Dulce, tearfully. "He makes my life perfectly wretched to me."

"How *can* you say that!" exclaims Dare, indignantly. "I spend my whole time trying to please you—in vain! It is your own temper is at fault."

"You hear that?" exclaims Dulce, triumphantly, turning to Sir Mark, who is trying vainly to edge in one word.

"I maintain what I say," goes on Roger, hurriedly, fearful lest Sir Mark if he gets time, will say something to support Dulce's side of the question. "It *can't* be my fault. You know I am very fond of you. There have even been moments," says Mr. Dare, superbly, "when if you had asked me to lie down and let you trample on me, I should have done it!"

"Then do it!" says Dulce, with decision. "Now this moment. I am in an awful temper, and my heels are an inch and a half high. I should perfectly *love* to trample on you. So make haste"—imperiously, "hurry, I'm waiting."

"I shan't" says Dare; "I shan't make myself ridiculous for a girl who detests me."

"Now, isn't that just like him?" says Dulce, appealing to the company at large, who are enjoying themselves intensely—notably Mr. Brown. "Simply because I told him it would give me some slight pleasure if he fulfilled his promise, he has decided on breaking it. He has refused to keep his solemm word, just to vex me."

"That is not my reason."

"Then you are afraid of the high-heeled shoes," with a scornful laugh.

"I am afraid of nothing," hotly.

"Not even of ridicule?"

"Well, yes, I *am* afraid of that. Most fellows are. But I don't wish to carry on the argument, I have nothing more to say to you."

"Nor I to you. I hope you will never address me again as long as you live. Ah!" glancing out of the window, with an assumption of the most extreme relief and joy—"Here is Mr. Gower coming across the lawn. I *am* glad. Now, at least, I shall have some one to talk to me, who will not scold and quarrel incessantly, and who can sometimes behave like a gentleman."

"Tell him so. It will raise him to the seventh heaven of delight, no doubt," says Roger, in an indescribable tone.

"I thought it was arranged that we were not to speak to each other again," says Dulce, with considerable severity.

Now Portia, being strange to the household, is a little frightened, and a good deal grieved by this passage at arms.

"Is it really so bad as they would have us think?" she says, in a low tone, to Sir Mark, whom she has beckoned to her side. "Is it really all over between them?"

"Oh, dear, no!" says Sir Mark, with the fine smile that characterizes his lean, dark face. "Don't make yourself unhappy; *we* are quite accustomed to their idiosyncrasies by this time; you, of course, have yet much to learn. But, when I tell you that, to my certain knowledge, they have bid each other an eternal adieu every week during the past three years, you will have your first lesson in the art of understanding them."

"Ah! you give me hope," says Portia, smiling.

At this moment Mr. Gower enters the room.

"Ah! how d'ye do!" says Dulce, nestling up to him, her soft skirts making a gentle *frou-frou* as she moves; "*so* glad you have come. You are late, are you not?" She gives him her hand, and smiles up into his eyes. To all the others her excessive cordiality means only a desire to chagrin Dare, to Stephen Gower it means—well, perhaps, at this point of their acquaintance he hardly knows what it means—but it certainly heightens her charms in his sight.

"Am I?" he says, in answer to her remark. "That is just what has been puzzling me. My watch has gone to the bad, and all the way here I have felt as if the distance between my place and the Hall was longer than I had ever

known it before. If I am to judge by my own impatience to be here, I am late, indeed."

She smiles again at this, and says, softly:

"You are not wet, I hope? Such a day to come out. It was a little rash, was it not?"

With the gentlest air of solicitude she lays one little white jeweled hand upon his coat sleeve, as though to assure herself no rain had alighted there. Gower laughs gaily.

"Wet? No," he says, gazing at her with unmistakable admiration. His eyes betray the fact that he would gladly have lifted the small jeweled hand from his arm to his lips; but, as it is, he does not dare so much as to touch it though never so lightly. "Rain does me more good than harm," he says.

"How did you come?" asks she, still charmingly anxious about his well-being.

"I rode. A very good mare, too; though it seemed to me she never traveled so slowly as to-day."

"You rode? Ah! then you got all that last heavy shower," says Dulce, who has plainly made up her mind to go in for compassion of the very purest and simplest.

"My *dear* fellow!" puts in Roger at this juncture, "you don't half consider yourself. Why on earth didn't you order out the covered carriage and a few fur rugs?"

Gower colors; but Roger is smiling so naturally that he cannot, without great loss of courtesy, take offence. Treating Dare's remark, however, as beneath notice, he turns and addresses himself solely to Dulce.

"To tell you the truth," he says, calmly, "I adore rain. A sunny hour is all very well in its way, and possesses its charms, no doubt, but for choice give me a rattling good shower."

To Roger, of course, this assertion, spoken so innocently, is quite too utterly delicious. Indeed, everybody smiles more or less, as he or she remembers the cause of the quarrel a moment since. Had Gower been thinking for ever, he could hardly have made a speech so calculated to annoy Dulce as that just made. To add to her discomfiture, Roger laughs aloud, a somewhat bitter, irritating laugh, that galls her to the quick.

"I must say I cannot sympathize with your taste," she says, very petulantly, to Gower; and then, before that young

man has time to recover from the shock received through the abrupt change of her manner from "sweetness and light" to transcendental gloom, she finishes his defeat by turning her back upon him, and sinking into a chair beside Portia.

"A gleam of sunshine at last," exclaims Sir Mark, at this moment, coming for the third time to the surface, in the fond hope of once more restoring peace to those around.

"Ah, yes, it is true," says Portia, holding up her hand to let the solitary beam light upon it. It lies there willingly enough, and upon her white gown, and upon her knitting needles, that sparkle like diamonds beneath its touch.

"And the rain has ceased," says Julia. "How nice of it. By-the-by, where is Fabian?"

"You know he never sees anyone," says Dulce, a little reproachfully, and in a very low tone.

"But why?" asks Portia, tnrning her face to Dulce. Even as she speaks she regrets her question, and she colors a hot, beautiful crimson as the quick vehemence of her tone strikes on her own ears.

Sir Mark, leaning over her chair, says:

"Two lessons in one day? Ambitious pupil! Well, if you must learn, know this: Fabian never goes anywhere, except to church, and never receives anybody even in his own home, for a reason that, I suppose, even you are acquainted with." He looks keenly at her as he speaks.

"Yes—I know—that is, I have heard, of course," says Portia, in a very still fashion, bending her eyes upon her knitting once more.

"How suddenly the rain has ceased," says some one; "it will be a very charming evening after all."

"The flowers are already beginning to hold up their poor heads," says Dulce, gazing down anxiously at the "garden quaint and fair." that stretches itself beneath the window. The skies are clearing, the clouds are melting away, far up above in the dark blue dome that overshadows the earth.

"The great Minister of Nature, that upon the world imprints the virtue of the heaven, and doles out Time for us with his beam," is coming slowly into view from between two dusky clouds, and is flinging abroad his yellow gleams of light.

"I hear wheels," says Dicky Browne, suddenly.

Everybody wakes up at once; and all the women try surreptitiously to get a glimpse of their hair in the mirrors.

"Who can it be?" says Dulce, anxiously.

"If we went to the upper window we could see," says Dicky Browne, kindly, whereupon they all rise in a body, and, regardless of tempers and dignity, run to the window that overlooks the avenue, and gaze down upon the gravel to see who fate may be bringing them.

It brings them a vehicle that fills them with consternation —a vehicle that it would be charitable to suppose was built in the dark ages, and had never seen the light until now. It is more like a sarcophagus than anything else, and is drawn by the fossilized remains of two animals that perhaps in happier times were named horses. For to-day, to enable their mistress to reach Blount Hall, they have plainly been galvanized, and have, in fact, traversed the road that lies between the Hall and Blount Hollow on strictly scientific principles.

"The Gaunt equipage!" says Dicky Browne, in an awe-struck tone. Nobody answers him. Everybody is overfilled with a sense of oppression, because of the fact that the ancient carriage beneath contains a still more ancient female, fatally familiar to them all. Smiles fade from their faces. All is gloom.

Meantime, the coachman (who has evidently come straight from the Ark), having turned some handle that compels the galvanized beasts to come to a standstill, descends, with slow and fearful steps, to the ground.

He has thrown the reins to another old man who is sitting on the box beside him, and who, though only ten years his junior, is always referred to by him as "the boy." Letting down a miraculous amount of steps, he gives his arm to a dilapidated old woman, who, with much dignity, and more difficulty, essays to reach the gravel.

"Some day or other, when out driving," says Dicky Browne, meditatively, "those three old people will go to sleep, and those animated skeletons will carry them to the land where they would *not* be."

Then a step is heard outside, and they all run back to their seats and sink into them, and succeed in looking exactly as if they had never quitted them for the past three hours, as the door opens and the man announces Miss Gaunt.

"Remember the puddings," says Dicky Browne, in a careful aside, as Dulce rises to receive her first guest.

She is tall—and gaunt as her name. She is old, but strong-minded. She affects women's rights, and all that sort of thing, and makes herself excessively troublesome at times. Women, in her opinion, are long-suffering, down-trodden angels; all men are brutes! Meetings got up for the purpose of making men and women detest each other are generously encouraged by her. It is useless to explain her further, as she has little to do with the story, and, of course, you have all met her once (I hope not twice) in your lifetimes,

Dulce goes up to greet her with her usual gracious smile. Then she is gently reminded that she once met Julia Beaufort before, and then she is introduced to Portia. To the men she says little, regarding them probably as beings beneath notice, all, that is, excepting Dicky Browne, who insists on conversing with her, and treating her with the most liberal cordiality, whether she likes it or not.

Dexterously he leads up the conversation, until culinary matters are brought into question, when Miss Gaunt says in her slow, crushing fashion:

"How do you like that last woman I sent you? Satisfactory, eh?"

"Cook, do you mean?" asks Dulce, to gain time.

"Yes—cook," says the old lady, uncompromisingly. "She was"—severely—"in my opinion, one of the best cooks I ever met."

"Yes, of course, I dare say. We just think her cooking a little monotonous," says poor Dulce, feeling as if she is a culprit fresh brought to the bar of justice.

"Monotonous!" says Miss Gaunt, in an affronted tone, giving her bonnet an indignant touch that plants it carefully over her left ear. "I don't think I understand. A monotonous cook! In my day there were bad cooks, and good cooks, and indifferent cooks, but monotonous cooks—never! Am I to believe by your accusation that she repeats herself?"

"Like history; exactly so. Very neat, indeed," says Mr. Browne, approvingly.

"Well, in the matter of puddings, she does—rather," says Dulce, somewhat fearfully.

"Ah! In point of fact, she doesn't suit you," says Miss Gaunt, fixing Dulce with a stony glare.

"There you are wrong," puts in Mr. Browne, regardless of the fact that she has treated all his other overtures with open contempt, "that is exactly what she does. Don't take a false impression of the case. She *suets* us tremendously! Doesn't she, Dulce?"

Here Miss Blount, I regret to say, laughs out loud, so does Sir Mark, to everybody's horror. Mr. Browne alone maintains a dignified silence. What Miss Gaunt might or might not have said on this occasion must now forever remain unknown, as Sir Christopher enters at this moment, and shortly after him Mr. Boer.

"Was Florence unable to come? I hope she is quite well," says Dulce, with conventional concern.

"Quite, thank you. But she feared the air."

"The heir?" says Julia Beaufort, inquiringly, turning to Dicky, who is now unhappily quite close to her. Julia, who never listens to anything, has just mastered the fact that Florence Boer is under discussion, and has heard the word "air" mentioned in connection with her.

"Yes. Didn't you hear of it?" says Dicky Browne. confidentially.

"No," says Julia, also, confidentially.

"Why, it is common talk now," says Dicky, as if surprised at her ignorance on a subject so well known to the rest of the community.

"Never heard a word of it," says Julia. "Was it in the papers!"

"N—o. Hardly, I think," says Dicky.

Even as he ceases speaking, three words, emanating from Mr. Boer's ecclesiastical lips, attract Julia's attention. They are as follows: "sun and air!" He, poor man, has just been telling Dulce that his wife (who is slightly hypochondriacal) is very susceptible to the influences of both light and wind. Julia misunderstands. Misled by Dicky's wilfully false insinuation about Florence, whose incessant grievance it is that no baby has come to bless her fireside, she turns to the unfortunate curate and says blandly.

"Dear Mr. Boer, *so* glad! I never knew of it until this very instant, when I heard you telling Dulce of your sweet little son and heir. I congratulate you. Of course"—coquettishly—"you are very proud of it. Having had three dear babies of my own I can quite rejoice with you and Mrs. Boer."

Deadly silence follows this outburst. Mr. Boer blushes a dingy red. The others relapse into an awed calm; all is confusion.

Portia is the first to recover herself.

"Dear Dulce, may we have our tea?" she says, sweetly, pointing to the table in the distance, where the man, five minutes ago, had placed the pretty Sèvres cups and saucers.

By this time Julia has awakened to the fact that she has committed herself in some way unknown to her; has, in fact, taken a false step not now to be retrieved.

"What lovely cups!" she says, therefore, very hurriedly, to Dulce, pointing to the Sèvres on the distant table, with a view to covering her confusion; "so chaste—so unique. I adore old china. I myself am something of a connoisseur. Whenever I have a spare penny," with an affected little laugh, "I go about collecting it."

"I wish she would collect herself," says Dicky Browne, in a careful aside; "I'm sure it is quite awful the way she has just behaved to poor Boer. Putting him in such an awkward position, you know. He looks just as if he had been found guilty of some social misdemeanor. Look at him, Dulce, he isn't going to have a fit, is he?"

"I hope not," says Dulce, with a furtive glance at the discomfited Boer, "but what could have induced Julia to make that unlucky speech? Dicky, you horrid boy, I believe you could tell the truth about it if you would."

"I object to your insinuation," says Mr. Browne, "and I object also to being called a boy. Though, after all"—reflectively—"I don't see why I should. The difference between the boy and man is so slight that nobody need create a feud about it. A boy has apples, toffy, twine and penknives in his pocket—a young man has a pipe instead. It is really of no consequence, and perhaps the pipe is the cleanest. I give in, therefore, and I am *not* offended."

"But still, you have not answered me," says the astute Dulce. "Did you incite Julia to make that unpleasant speech?"

"I'd scorn to answer such a question," says Mr. Browne, loftily. "What a likely thing, indeed. If I had incited her she would have made a great deal more of her opportunity. 'Success,' says James, 'is passionate effort.' I made no effort, but—"

"Nonsense," says Dulce. "She made a most disgraceful lot of *her* effort, at all events, and I do believe you were the instigator."

"'You wrong me every way, you wrong me, Brutus,'" quotes Mr. Browne, reproachfully. "However, let that pass. Tea is ready, I think. Pour it out, and be merciful.

Thus adjured, Miss Blount pours it out. She looks so utterly sweet in her soft leaf-green tea gown as she does it, that Mr. Gower, in spite of her unkindness of an hour agone, feels sufficient courage to advance and offer himself a candidate for unlimited cups of tea.

He is quite three minutes at her elbow before she deigns to notice him. Then she turns; and letting her eyes rest on him as though she is for the first time made aware of his proximity, though in truth she has known of it for the past sixty seconds, she says, calmly—

"Bread and butter, or cake, Mr. Gower?" quite as innocently as if she is ignorant (which she is not) of his desire to be near her.

"Neither, thank you," says Stephen, gravely. "It was not that brought me to—"

"But, please, do have some cake," says Miss Blount, lifting her eyes to his, and making him a present of a sweet and most unexpected smile. As she says this, she holds out to him on a plate a pretty little bit of plum cake, which she evidently expects him to devour with relish. It is evident. too, that she presents it to him as a peace-offering, and as a sign that all animosity is at an end between them.

"No, thank you," says Mr. Gower, decidedly, but gratefully, and with a very tender smile, meant as a return for hers.

"Oh, but you must, indeed!" declares she, in a friendly fashion, with a decisive shake of the head and uplifted brows.

Now, Mr. Gower. poor soul, hates cake.

"Thanks, awfully," he says, in a deprecating tone, "I know its nice, very nice, but—er—the fact is I can't bear cake. It—it's horrid, I think."

"Not this one," says Dulce remorselessly—"you have never eaten a cake like this. Let me let you into a little secret; I am very fond of cooking, and I made this cake *all myself*, with my own hands, every bit of it! There! Now, you really must eat it, you know, or I shall think you are slighting my attempts at housewifery."

"Oh! if you really made it *yourself*," says the doomed young man, in a resigned tone, trying to light his rejected countenance with an artificial smile, "that makes such a difference, you know. I shall quite enjoy it now. But—er—' glancing doubtfully at her small white hands, "did you really make it yourself?"

"Should I say it, if not sure?" reproachfully; "I even mixed it all up, *so*," with a pantomimic motion of her fingers, that suggests the idea of tearing handfuls of hair out of somebody's head. "I put in the raisins and currants and everything myself, while cook looked on. And she says I shall be quite a grand cook myself presently if—if I keep to it; she says, too, I have quite the right turn in my wrists for making cakes."

"Is this the cook you don't like?" asks he, gloomily, while sadly consuming the cake she has pressed upon him. He is eating it slowly and with care; there is, indeed, no exuberant enjoyment in his manner, no touch of refined delight as he partakes of the delicacy manufactured by his dainy hostess.

"Yes," says Miss Blount, in a somewhat changed tone. "But what do *you* know of her."

"I think she's a humbug," says Gower, growing more moody every instant.

"Then you mean, of course, that she didn't mean one word she said to me, and that—that in effect, I can't make cakes?" says Dulce, opening her large eyes, and regarding him in a manner that embarrasses him to the last degree. He rouses himself, and makes a supreme effort to retrieve his position.

"How could you imagine I meant that?" he says, putting the last morsel of the cake, with a thankful heart, into his mouth. "I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much as this."

"Really, you liked it? You thought it—"

"Delicious," with effusion.

"Have some more!" says Dulce, generously, holding out to him the cake plate near her. "Take a big bit. Take"—she has her eyes fixed rather searchingly upon his—"*this* piece."

Something in her manner warns him it will be unwise to refuse; with a sinking heart he takes the large piece of cake she has pointed out to him, and regards it as one might prussic acid. His courage fails him.

"Must I," he says, turning to her with a sudden and almost fearful change of tone, "must I eat all this?"

"Yes—all!" says Miss Blount, sternly.

Sadly, and in silence, he completes his task. But so slowly that when it is finished he finds Mr. Boer and Miss Gaunt have risen, and are making their adieux to their pretty hostess, and perforce he is bound to follow their example.

When he is gone, Roger gives way to a speech of a somewhat virulent order.

"I must say I think Gower has turned out the most insufferable puppy I ever met," he says, an ill-subdued flash in his handsome eyes.

"Mr. Gower!" exclaims Dulce, in soft tones of wonder, and with a somewhat mocking smile. "Why, it is only a week or two ago since you told me he was your greatest chum or pal, or—I can't really remember at this moment the horrid slang word you used, but I suppose its English was 'friend.'"

"Fellows at school and fellows at college are very different from fellows when they are grown up and launched on their own hook," says Mr. Dare with a frown.

"What an abominably arranged sentence," says Sir Mark, with his fine smile, coming to the rescue for the third time to-day. "I couldn't follow it up. How many fellows were at school?—and how many at college?—and how many were grown up? It sounds like a small army!"

At this Roger laughs, and moves away to the upper end of the room, where Julia is sitting. Dulce shrugs her wilful little shoulders, and taking up the huge white cat that lies on the rug at her feet, kisses it, and tells it in an undertone that it is a "dear sweet" and a "puss of snow," and that all the wide world is cross and cranky, and disagreeable, except its own lovely self.

She has just arrived at this uncomplimentary conclusion about mankind generally, when Dicky Browne, who is standing at one of the lower windows, says abruptly:

"I say; look at Quail and her new puppies. Who let them out?"

At this Miss Blount drops the white cat suddenly, and, cruelly regardless of her indignant mew, rushes to catch a glimpse of the new pups; Roger rises precipitately from his chair, on the same purpose bent. As all the other windows are occupied, except the one nearest the fireplace, both he and Dulce make for it together.

Quail the red setter, proud and happy, is marching past on the gravel outside, her two sons beside her. The yellowest puppy has purloined a bone from some unknown quarter, and is carrying it with him triumphantly. His brother, eyeing him furtively from time to time, is plainly filled with envy because of his good luck, and is inwardly consumed with a desire to make the delicacy above-mentioned his own.

At length avarice conquers prudence; there is a snap, two snarls, and a violent tussle, during which both puppies roll over and over each other on the damp path, and finally, the mother interfering, seizes the bone of contention as her own, and in canine language, desires the two culprits to follow her with hang-dog looks and lowered tails, to their kennel.

"Ha, ha, ha!" says Roger, forgetful of everything but the pretty pups and their tiny war.

"Ha, ha, ha!" says Dulce, equally unmindful of the stormy past. "How sweet they looked, naughty things. And how they *did* bark and bite. Dr. Watts should have been here to see them."

"I wonder will they get that bone back?" says Roger, turning to her, all animosity forgotten in the pleasurable excitement of the moment.

"Let us come and see," exclaims she, with considerable animation, and in the friendliest tone imaginable. She glances up at him from under her long lashes with one of her brightest and sunniest smiles, and moves a step nearer to him.

"We must run if we want to be in time for the finish," says Roger—"come."

He takes her hand, and together they move towards the door. They are, apparently, as happy and as good friends as if no harsh words had ever passed between them.

"Going out now," says Julia, as they pass the low wicker chair in which she is lounging, "so late?"

"Don't be long, Dulce," says Portia, in her plaintive way. "I miss you when you are out of my sight."

"I shan't be any time," says Dulce.

"Mr. Gower said it was going to rain, and it is a long way to the yard," says Julia again. "Stay here, and keep dry."

"I suppose Gower is not infallible," says Roger, hastily. "I think it will not rain."

"I think so too," says Dulce adorably; "and as for Mr.

Gower, I only know one thing; I shall never give *him* any of my own cake again, because he looked just as if he was going to die, or have a tooth drawn, all the time he was eating it to-day."

Then they disappear, still hand-in-hand, in search of the refractory puppies, and Portia, turning to Sir Mark, says softly:

"What am I to think now? How is it with them? Have they—"

"Yes; quite that," says Sir Mark, airily. "All is forgotten; the storm is over—not even a breeze remains. The delicate charms of two snarling puppies have put an end to strife—for the present, Let us be grateful for small mercies—*and* the puppies."

"It is very wonderful," says Portia, still showing some soft surprise.

CHAPTER XI.

"There's something in a flying horse."
PETER BELL.

"For of fortunes sharpe adversite,
The worst kind of infortune is this,
A man that hath been in prosperite
And it remember, whan it passed is!"
CHAUCER.

"WHERE are you going, Uncle Christopher?" asks Dulce, as Sir Christopher enters the small drawing-room, booted and spurred for a long journey.

Portia, in the distance, bending over an easel; Julia is forming some miraculous flower, that never yet was seen by land or sea, on a coarse towel, with some crewel wools; the Boodie is lying on her little fat stomach, drawing diligently with a slate and pencil; Dulce, charmingly idle, is leaning back in a lounging chair, doing nothing.

"To Warminster," says Sir Christopher "What shall I bring you girls from that sleepy little town?"

"Something sweet," says Dulce, going up to him, and laying her soft arms lovingly round his neck.

"Like yourself," says Sir Christopher.

"Now that is sarcasm," says Miss Dulce, patting his fresh old cheek very fondly. "I meant chocolates, or burnt almonds, or even everton toffy, if all things fail."

"And what shall I bring the others?" asks Sir Christopher, laughing; "you have a sweet tooth, you naughty child, perhaps they haven't."

"*I* have," says Portia, turning round on her seat. "Bring us as much as ever you can."

"Burnt almonds are my chief delight," murmurs Julia, affectedly and somewhat absently, being sick with grief, because she cannot reconcile it to her conscience that the stem of an arum lily should be peacock blue.

"Bring some crackers," says the Boodie, suddenly warming into life, and so far condescending to notice Sir Christopher as to roll round her portly person until she lies prone upon her back. From this dignified position she eyes Sir Christopher magisterially. "*Real* crackers, mind," she says severely, "that will say c-r-r-rack, and show fire! those last you brought"—contemptuously—"were a humbug!"

"Elizabeth!" exclaims her mother in a would-be shocked tone (the Boodie rejoices in that lengthy name), "what *are* you saying?"

"The truth," says the Boodie, unflinchingly; "the last he brought were a reg'lar swindle—ask Jacky; why they wouldn't go off even if you *stamped* on 'em."

She so plainly—by the severity of her glance—conveys to every one the impression that she believes Sir Christopher on that last unfortunate occasion had purposely bought for them crackers beneath notice, that the poor old gentleman, though innocent of offence, feels himself growing warm beneath her relentless gaze.

"It wasn't my fault, my dear," he says, apologetically; "I quite meant them to go off. I did, indeed."

"Perhaps so. Take care, however, it doesn't occur again," says the Boodie, with so careful, though unconscious, an imitation of her mother's manner when addressing her maid, that they all laugh, whereupon she rolls back again to her former position. and takes no further notice of them.

Just at this moment Fabian enters the room.

"Going to drive to Warminster?" he asks his uncle.

"Yes."

"Not Bess, I hope?" alluding to a very objectionable young mare in the stables.

"Yes," says Sir Christopher again. "Why not?"

"She is utterly unsafe. About the worst thing in chest-

nuts I ever met. I took her out myself the other day—rode her straight from this to Grange; and I confess, I should not care to do it again, Take one of the other horses, and let that beast lie quiet until you can get rid of her."

"Nonsense!" says Sir Christopher, scornfully; "I wouldn't part with her for any money. She is the greatest beauty this side of the county."

"Her beauty is her one point; for the rest, she is vindictive and ill-mannered."

"Don't do anything foolish, dearest," says Dulce, with her eyes large and frightened. "Do listen to Fabian."

"And let myself be conquered by a pettish chestnut, at my age," says Sir Christopher, lightly—he had been a famous horseman in his day. "My dear child, you don't understand, and there are moments when Fabian romances. To satisfy you, however, I shall take George with me."

"'Wilful man must have his way,'" quotes Fabian, with a slight shrug. "Before I go out, shall I look over those accounts with Slyme?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the warren, with the others, to have a few shots at the rabbits; they overrun the place."

"Very good. Just ask Slyme about the accounts. By-the-by, he gets more irregular daily."

"More drunk, do you mean?" says Fabian. There are moments when his manner is both cold and uncompromising.

Portia regards him curiously.

"Yes! yes! Just so," says Sir Christopher, hastily. "But for the melancholy story that attaches itself to him—and that, of course, is some excuse for him—I really should not feel myself justified in keeping him here much longer."

"What story?" asks Portia.

"Oh! well; it all lies in a nutshell. It is an old story, too; one has so often heard it. A bad son—dissipated—in perpetual hot water. A devoted father. Then, one day, a very bad story comes, and the son has to fly the country. And then, some time afterward, news comes of his death. Slyme never saw him again. He broods over that, I think; at least, he has never been the same man since the son, Matthew, left England. It was all a very unhappy business."

"For the father, perhaps. For the son, he had more than

ordinary luck to die as soon as he did," says Fabian. He does not speak at all bitterly. Only hopelessly, and without heart or feeling.

"Nobody knows how old Gregory got him out of the country so cleverly," says Sir Christopher. "It was a marvel how he managed to elude the grasp of the law."

"He satisfied the one principal creditor, I suppose?" says Fabian, indifferently.

"Oh! impossible," says Sir Christopher. "It came to hundreds, you know; and he hadn't a farthing. Well, good-by; I'm off. Expect me and the bon-bons about dinner-hour."

He nods to Portia and Julia, who smile at him in return, and, kissing Dulce, quits the room.

Fabian, following him, goes on to the library; and, having desired one of the men to send the secretary, Slyme, to him, sits down at one of the tables and turns over leisurely the pages of accounts that lie there.

After a brief examination, he tells himself impatiently that they are somewhat muddled, or have, at least, been attended to in a most slovenly manner. He has just discovered a serious mistake in the row of figures that adorns the end of the second page, when the door opens slowly, and Gregory Slyme comes in.

"Wait one moment, Slyme," says Fabian, without looking up from the figures before him. A moment passes in utter silence. Then Fabian, still with his eyes upon the account, says, somewhat sharply: "Why, it is altogether wrong. It has been attended to with extreme carelessness. Did you, yourself, see to this matter of Younge's?"

He waits, apparently for an answer but none comes. Lifting his eyes he fixes them scrutinizingly on the old man before him, and having fixed them, lets them rest there in displeased surprise.

Slyme, beneath this steady gaze, grows visibly uneasy. His eyes shift uncomfortably from one object in the room to another; his limbs are unsteady; the hand resting on the table near him is shaking. His face betrays vacancy mixed with a cunning desire to hide from observation the heaviness and sluggishness that is overpowering him.

"Speak," says Fabian, sternly and remorselessly; "you can frame an answer, I suppose."

The old man mutters something that is almost unintelligible, so thick and husky are his tones. His eyes grow more restless;—mechanically, and as though unconscious of the act, he leans his body stupidly against the book-case near him.

"You are drunk," says Fabian, with slow scorn—"leave the room."

Having said this he turns again to his papers, as though from this moment contemptuously unaware of the other's presence.

Slyme attempts an explanation:

"You wrong me, sir," he says, in a thick uncertain voice—"I—I am ill—; my head is bad at times—I—"

"That will do," says Fabian, such ineffable disgust in his whole manner as makes the miserable, besotted old wretch before him actually cower. "No more lies. I have spoken to you already twice this week—and—; do you know what hour it is?—twelve o'clock! you begin your day early."

"I assure you, sir," begins Slyme again. But Fabian will not listen:

"Go," he says, briefly, with a disdainful motion of the hand, and in a tone not to be disobeyed. Slyme moves towards the door in his usual slouching fashion, but, as he reaches it, pauses, and for one instant lifts his heavy eyes, and lets them rest upon the young man at the distant table.

This one instant reveals his thoughts. In his glance there is fear, distrust, and, above and beyond all, a malignant and undying hatred—such a hatred as might project itself from the eyes of the traitor upon his victim. There is, too, upon Slyme's face a contortion of the muscles, that it would be sacrilege to call a smile, that is revengeful, and somehow suggests the possibility that this man, however impotent he may now appear, has, in some strange fashion, acquired a hidden and terrible power over the young man, who a moment since had treated him with such scorn and contumely.

The old secretary's countenance for this fateful moment is one brilliant, if wicked phantasmagoria, in which the ghosts of long sustained thoughts appear and disappear, going from fear and its brother, hatred, to lasting revenge. Then all vanish; the usual soddened look returns to the man's face; he opens the door, and once more, instead of the evil genius he looked a second ago, a broken-down, drunken old crea-

ture crosses the threshold, shambles over the hall, and is lost presently amongst the many passages.

* * * * * * *

Meantime, *ennui* is reigning triumphantly in the drawing-room, more conspicuously in the case of Dulce.

"Hey-day," she says, with a little, idle yawn; "how I do wish everybody would not go out shooting, all at once. I think they might take it by turns. But all men are selfish; they never consider how lonely we may be."

"Why should one miss them?" says Julia, who in her soul considers every moment unoccupied by the society of a man (that is a possible lover) as time misspent.

"I don't know," says Dulce, candidly; "I am only sure of this, that I want them always."

Portia says nothing.

"Well, certainly, at times they are amusing," says Mrs. Beaufort, as though just awaking to the fact that now and again one *can* find a man with some wit or humor in him—"and I honestly confess"—with a little laugh and a great assumption of candor—"that I wish even Stephen Gower would drop in now and help us to pass away an hour or two."

"*Even* Stephen Gower!" repeats Dulce. "Julia, what has that poor young man done to you, that you should speak thus meanly of him? *Even*, what an unkind word!"

"I don't believe I quite meant it, do you know," says Julia, relenting. "I like Stephen Gower very much. By-the-by, what do you think of him? I never yet heard you express an opinion, good or bad, about him. Do it now."

Leaning back in her chair, Dulce slowly and thoughtfully raises her arms in the air, with her fingers tipping each other, until presently they fall indolently behind her head, where she lets them lie.

"Well, let me see," she says, lazily, "I think, perhaps, like Chaucer's man, he is a 'veray parfit gentil knight.'"

Portia lifts her eyes from her painting and turns them slowly upon her cousin; she regards her very silently for a moment or two, and then she smiles, and leaning forward, opens her lips.

"'And of his port as meke as is a mayde,'" she says, mis-

chievously, purposely choosing the same poet for her quotation that Dulce had taken for hers.

Miss Blount laughs.

"You, too, are severe upon our neighbor," she says, defending him more from obstinacy than from real desire to see justice done. "I confess he is at times a trifle too mild, but not effeminate, surely?"

"He is very handsome," says Portia, evasively.

"He has a charming mouth," says Dulce.

"I think you ought only to look at Roger's mouth," says Julia, prudishly, whereupon Dulce shrugs her shoulders, impatiently, and, turning, devotes herself for the next ten minutes to the small artist lying at her feet—an attention received by the imperturbable Boodie with the most exasperating unconcern.

The afternoon wanes; day is sinking to its rest. Behind the tall dark firs "the great gold sun-god, blazing through the sky" may still be seen, but now he grows aweary, and would fain give place to his sister, the pale moon.

"The sweet keen smell—the sighing sound" of coming night is on the air. The restless ocean is rolling inland with a monotonous roar; there is scarcely sufficient breeze to ruffle the leaves of the huge chestnut that stands near one corner of the old house, not far from the balcony outside the drawing-room windows, where Mrs. Beaufort and the two girls are sitting.

The children are playing somewhere in the distance. Their sweet and merry voices come up to the balcony now and then, and mingle with the breath of descending night.

And now from beneath the fir trees two figures emerge, and come towards the stone steps where their hostess is sitting.

"Are you clean?" asks Dulce, with a charming smile, leaning over the railings to see them better as they draw closer.

"To confess a horrid truth, I don't believe we are," says Stephen Gower, glancing up at her, and regarding his rough shooting coat somewhat ruefully. "Will that admission exclude us from Paradise?"

"Dulce," says Dicky Browne, who is the second of the two figures, "I'm worn out. I've been walking all day, a thing I very seldom do; I have been firing off an unlimited

number of cartridges, without, I am bound to confess—I am, as experience has doubtless taught you, a remarkably truthful person—without any very brilliant consequences, and I feel that very little more fatigue will be my death. Have compassion on us. We faint, we die; show mercy and give us some tea and some cake, You're awfully hungry, Gower, aren't you?"

"Well, not very," says Mr. Gower, too occupied in his contemplation of Dulce's charming face to be quite alive to what is so plainly expected of him.

"Oh, nonsense! He is tremendously hungry," says Dicky Browne. "Let us up, Dulce, and we will sit out there on the balcony, and won't soil anything. Except gore, there isn't much staining about us."

"But that is worse than anything," says Dulce with a shudder. "However, come up, and if you keep *very* far away, I daresay I shan't mind much."

"Hard conditions," says Gower, in a lower tone.

So tea is got for them again, and the children, who always seem to *feel* when plum-cake is to be had, come trooping noisily up the steps to join, uninvited, in the festivities.

Great content follows, and, indeed, all is peace until something said by the Boodie creates a confusion that sweeps calm to the winds. She has esconced herself on Mr. Gower's knee, without saying so much as "by your leave" or "with your leave," and now, raising one soft little dimpled hand to his chin, turns his face towards her own, and for a full minute regards him with silent curiosity.

"Well, is your Highness satisfied?" says Gower, feeling amused.

The Boodie takes no notice of this enquiry. She puckers up her smooth brows as if puzzled, and then says, slowly—

"I don't believe one word of it!"

"Of what?" says Gower. Everybody by this time is looking at the Boodie, and the Boodie is steadfastly regarding Stephen Gower.

"It wasn't true what she said," goes on the Boodie, meditatively, "because you have hair on your lip. *Girls* don't have hair on their lips—do they?"

"Not as a general rule," says Dicky Browne. "There *have* been noble exceptions, but unhappily they are rare. Miss Gaunt is perhaps the only girl down here who can boast

of hirsute adornment, and the growth upon her upper lip is not to be despised. But then she belongs to the higher and more powerful class of females, in fact, as Wordsworth so touchingly expresses it, she

> 'Wears upon her forehead clear
> The freedom of a mountaineer.'

I always—mildly—think Wordsworth must have been acquainted with Miss Gaunt."

"Go on," says Stephen to the Boodie, who is still lost in thought. "You have not yet told me what it is you disbelieve."

"It was something Portia said," returns the Boodie, composedly.

"That *I* said! surely you are mistaken, darling," says Portia.

"No, I am not," persists the Boodie, in an unmoved tone.

"Stephen," again turning his face to hers, "are you 'meke'?"

At this word all the truth becomes at once known to Portia and Dulce. The Boodie had been in the room when they were discussing Stephen with her mother. She had heard everything. She is a little pitcher—she has long ears. Can nothing be done to stop her further speech?

"He is a very nice boy, but I'm not prepared to go as far as calling him meek," says Dicky Browne, who begins to scent mischief in the air. "Who applied that word to him?"

"I think it is time all you children ran away to nurse," says Julia, in answer to an agonized glance from both girls.

"It was Portia," says the Boodie to Dicky Browne, in her sweet innocent treble. "Dulce said first he was a 'knight,' and then Portia said he was a 'meek maid.' She said something, too, about 'port,' but I don't think she meant Uncle Christopher's port; I think she meant Stephen's."

Deadly silence follows this bombshell. As Mr. Gower, only the day before, had been reading the "Canterbury Tales" for them in his very best old English style, it is impossible to believe the two quotations from them, used in the morning, are not now alive in his memory.

Gower colors, and looks questioningly at Dulce. His expression is not altogether one of chagrin. The child had

said she (Dulce) had called him a knight—"a veray parfit gentil knight" it must have been. There is comfort, and even gladness in this thought; so much comfort, that he even feels inclined to forgive Portia for comparing him to a "mayde." Still, some awkwardness is naturally felt by all—except the Boodie, who yawns indifferently, and finally follows the other children up to the nursery—and every one is vainly trying to think of some commonplace remark, that, when uttered, shall have the effect of restoring conversation once more into a safe channel, when an interruption occurs that puts chagrin and awkwardness out of their minds for the rest of the evening.

First upon the air the reports of two guns being fired off quickly, one after the other; then the quick flinty sound of a horse's galloping hoofs.

Nearer they came, and still nearer, with that mad haste belonging to them, that suggests unmanageable fury in the brute beast; and as all on the balcony rise simultaneously and press forward to see what may be coming, Bess and the dog-cart turn the corner near the chestnut tree, and dash onwards towards the lower lawn.

Sir Christopher, grim and as full of rage as the animal in whose power he now finds himself, is still holding the reins—but more for form's sake than anything else, as he has no control whatever over the infuriated chestnut, that, with reddened nostrils, and foam-covered flanks, is rushing madly down the green slope.

A sudden rise in the velvet lawn, causing the dog-cart to sway rather much to one side, unseats the groom, who is flung somewhat heavily to the ground. Being fortunately, however, unhurt, he rises hastily, and runs frantically after the mare, as though in foolish hope, that he may yet overtake her and be of some service to his master. With a smothered exclamation, Gower and Dicky Browne dash down the balcony steps to join him in his vain pursuit.

Vain, indeed! At the lower end, by the long lawn, runs a river, small, but swift, and turbulent, that flows for two miles through park, and waving field, and glowing valley, to throw itself finally into the arms of the thirsty ocean.

Towards this the horse is rushing madly. Once on its bank, who shall tell what next may happen. There will be a

mad bound—a crash—a cry, perhaps, that will pierce through all other sounds—and then—and Sir Christopher—.

As these thoughts force themselves upon the girls, they shudder, and involuntarily move closer to each other. Dulce covers her face with her hands, as though to shut out some dreadful sight, and a low dry sob escapes her. Portia, deadly pale, but calm and wide-eyed, is clinging to the balcony rails, and is gazing in speechless fear at the chestnut, that every instant is bringing nearer to the fateful goal. Julia, from time to time, emits short little shrieks of terror, she being the sort of person who, in moments of peril, would be always safe to scream.

Onward flies the mare. Sir Christopher (as yet bolt upright in his seat, and apparently, from the back view they can get of him, still so possessed with rage as to be unconscious of fear) is trying hopelessly to manage her.

Nearer and nearer to the brink of the stream they draw; now they are within a few yards of it; soon help will be of little use, and the panting groom and the two young men who are following him will only be in time to witness more closely the disaster. All seems, indeed, hopeless, when a man, springing from behind the thick laurel hedge that grows on the right, rushes forward, and, seizing Bess by the head by sheer force of mind and body, forces her upon her haunches.

"It is Fabian!" says Portia, in a voice sharp with fear. "Dulce!—Dulce!" there is positive agony in her tone.

Dulce, letting her hands fall from her face, looks up. Julia forgets to scream; all three watch with intensest anxiety the scene being enacted below.

And now ensues a struggle between man and beast; a struggle sharp but short. The beast, frightened, or, perhaps, with fury exhausted, it may be, compelled against its will to acknowledge the superior power of mind over matter—gives way, and after a good deal of prancing stands tolerably quiet, though still trembling from excitement and violent temper.

By this time the groom, with Gower and Dicky Browne, have joined them.

"Get out Sir Christopher," says the groom, in an agitated voice, the swift run having added to his anxiety.

"Not a bit of it," says Sir Christopher, indignantly, "I'll take her back to the stables, or—"

"Get down at once," says Fabian, in a quick, decided tone. "Don't delay, she is dangerous still and may bolt again at any moment. Besides, you have had enough of it, surely!"

"I'm not going to be conquered by any mare born," says the old Baronet, obstinacy setting it at this point; "what dy'e think I bred her for, eh? To be made a laughing-stock for the county, I suppose, eh? Nothing of the sort. She shall own me as master if I die for it. Here, get out of my way all you boys—"

It is plain Sir Christopher is as yet undaunted, though, in truth, there is danger still; the chestnut is flinging up her head in an uncertain, frightened fashion, scattering angry foam as she does so, and her eyes are showing more white than is seemly.

Fabian, who is still holding the bridle with both hands, looks at his uncle, earnestly, almost, it might be said, curiously.

"If you are bent on taking this brute round yourself, of course, I shall go with you," he says, indifferently. "Hold her head, George, for a moment."

Even as he speaks the mare moves uneasily, and, as the groom approaches, throws up her head impatiently, and in so doing touches Fabian's right arm somewhat roughly. In spite of his self-control he winces perceptibly.

"You are hurt," says Sir Christopher, anxiously. "How? —where?"

"This arm," says Fabian, touching the injured part lightly. "A mere scratch, no doubt, but it hurts. Nevertheless, if you persist, I daresay I shall be able to hold her in check with the other."

"Here, George, lead her home," says Sir Christopher, hurriedly, throwing the reins he still holds to the groom, and hastily descending from the dog-cart. "To drive, indeed, with an injured arm! stuff and nonsense!" he says, severely. "Some people have no sense, eh? though I must say I believe that poor brute is maligned. But for those shots fired off just as I was entering the gates nothing would have happened."

"Roger and Sir Mark discharging their guns, I daresay," says Stephen; "awkward, they should have chosen just that moment to do it."

"Fate!" says Dicky Browne, solemnly.

Meantime, Fabian has turned away and gone quickly in the

direction of the house. Dulce, running down the balcony steps, goes up to him with a very white little face.

"Darling, how brave you were. I thought something dreadful was going to happen to you. It was a horrid moment. If that wicked Bess had persisted she might have thrown you down and killed you."

"Well, she didn't, you see," says Fabian, lightly—but he shrinks a little from her embrace, and moves so that she cannot touch his right arm. His eyes are fixed upon the balcony above, where Portia still stands, pale as an early snowdrop and thoroughly unnerved. There is, however, about her a certain calm, that is part of her nature, and that, perhaps, in her very greatest emergency, and in her bitterest hour of need, would still be hers.

At this moment, however, Fabian so far wrongs her as to attribute this inborn quietude to coldness and indifference. He turns again to Dulce.

"Take that terrified look off your face," he says, somewhat languidly, with a smile that is faintly bitter. "You should show more self-control. Take example by your cousin; see how composed she can be, and how sensible."

He smiles again, and indicates Portia by a glance. For an instant his eyes meet hers. Is he wrong in thinking she is even a shade paler now than she was a moment since? He is not sure; and he has not time given him to make the thought a certainty, as Miss Vibart, turning slowly, goes towards one of the drawing-room windows, and presently is lost to sight.

There was something in her eyes, in the hurried glance he got at them, that saddens Fabian. Almost forgetful of Dulce's presence, he walks away from her, and, having gained the house, goes moodily up the stairs towards his own room.

His soul is disquieted; an agony of unrest, that even in his first days of despair had not visited him, is on him now; a longing, a craving, for what he knows (ah! the deep grief of that!) can never be obtained.

Why had her soft eyes looked so reproachful a while ago? Why had she turned so quickly away from him when he had spoken those few harsh words, for which he hates himself now?

Her pallor returns to him, and the fear in her large eyes,

Surely he should have taken note of them first, and not of the calmness and seeming coldness and her utter composure.

And then a strange soft light comes into his face, as he remembers how sweet she looked standing there, half leaning over the balcony, and looking down on him—unworthy, pale, but full of beauty.

It may be that other women have been lovely in his eyes, but, surely, none have reached her standard. One, indeed, in the past years had appeared to him (though he had not loved her) as nearly perfect as a woman can be; but, now comparing her with Portia, as he has often done of late, she —the former beauty—had paled in comparison.

He has been reading some old book of late, and now, thinking of both women, a description in it of some ancient queen and one of her court comes to him as being applicable to the train of thought in which he is indulging.

"One, amongst other purposes, said unto them of late, that she (the queen) 'excelleth as far the duchess as the golden sun excelleth the silver moon,' which appeareth in the gravity of her face. Thus say they that have seen them both."

As he reaches the corridor, and gains the threshold of his own room, a light step behind him, causing him to turn, he finds himself looking once again into Portia's eyes.

She is very pale still, and there is something pathetic about her mouth. Slowly she comes up to him, without uttering a word, until she is so close to him that she can touch him, if she will. Then she speaks:

"You wronged me just now," she says, in a low voice: "you had an evil thought about me! But not *now*, I think," regarding him earnestly. "You have gone over it all again in your own mind, and you understand now you misjudged me."

"You are quite right in all you say; I did misjudge you. I have discovered my error. You will forgive me?"

"I suppose so." She is looking down now, and is tapping the ground impatiently with her foot.

"You ought," says Fabian, quietly. "To misjudge one's neighbor is one of the commonest failings of mankind."

There is meaning in his tone. She acknowledges unwillingly the fact that she comprehends this meaning by a sign, silent but perceptible: she colors deeply, and, still looking

down, continues her tattoo upon the oaken flooring of the corridor.

"You are not very humble," she says at length, "even now, when you have had to demand my pardon."

"Am I not?" says Fabian, with a partly suppressed sigh. "I should be. Forgive me that, too, and—" He pauses to draw his breath quickly, as if in pain. At this she lifts her head, and something she sees in his expression tells her the truth,

"You are hurt," she says, hastily, going nearer to him. "Where?—how?"

There is deep, unrestrained anxiety in her tone.

"My arm," confesses Fabian, who is, indeed, suffering greatly, laying his left hand upon his right arm, high up above the elbow.

"Is it a sprain or a bruise?"

"A little of both, perhaps. I came up-stairs just now to ring for Parkins to help me off with my coat, and do something for me."

"Parkins!" says Portia, with fine contempt; "of what use is a man in a case like this. Why not ask Dulce—"

"Oh! it is really nothing; and you saw how frightened she was already. I had pity on her nerves."

"Then let me be Parkins for a few minutes," says Portia, with a little smile. "I used to be of great use to George" (her brother, Colonel Vibart) "occasionally when he came to grief at football, or in the hunting field. Let me see if my hand has lost its cunning."

"You won't like it," says Blount, hesitating; "it will look nasty, you know, and there will be blood, I think, and perhaps it will be better for me to —"

"This is my sitting-room," interrupts Portia, calmly, throwing open a door on the opposite side of the corridor. "Come in here, and let me see what has happened to you."

Fabian follows her obediently. It all seems to him something like a dream, that this girl, usually so listless, should now brighten into life, and grow energetic and anxious for his sake.

With gentle fingers she helps him to take off his coat, and, in a business-like, very matter-of-fact fashion, unfastens the gold link at his wrist, and, though paling a little as she sees the blood upon his sleeve, resolutely rolls it up and lays bare the injured arm.

It is looking dark and swollen, and the skin has been knocked off it in several places. The flesh has been a good deal bruised, and altogether the wound is an ugly one without being in any way serious. In spite of her efforts to the contrary, she blanches perceptibly, and shudders, and lets her lids droop rather heavily over her eyes.

"You are unfit for this sort of work," says Fabian, angry with himself, as he marks her agitation. "It was unpardonable of me even to permit you to attempt it." He moves back from her, and tries his shirt sleeve once more over his injured arm.

"Ah! do not touch it," says Portia, hastily; "the sleeve will only rub against it and make it worse."

Involuntarily she lays her hand on his to prevent his covering the wound, and looks at him with a glance full of sympathy and entreaty. So standing, with her eyes large and dark with pity, and her soft white hand trembling upon his, she seems to him so far

> "Beyond all women, womanly,
> He dreads to think how he should fare
> Who came so near as to despair!"

A pang desolates his heart. Alas! is not despair the only portion that can be meted out for him! The joy and the gladness of living, and the one great treasure of all—the heart's love—that beautifies and refines all it touches, can never be his; never for him, while this shadow rests upon him, will there be home or "hearthstone," or that deeper, more perfected sense of fellowship that exists between two souls only.

And this girl, with her hand on his, and

> "With eyes like open lotus flowers
> Bright in the morning rain."

looking straight up at him, with gentlest concern in her regard, how might it have been with him and her, if life had flowed in a pleasant stream, and no turbulent waves had come to disturb its calm and musical ripple?

How short have been his days of grace, how long must be his years of misery; just in the very opening of his life, in the silken morning of his youth, the blow had fallen, deadening his sky, and rendering all things gray.

In what a very little space, indeed, lie all our happy moments; even the most successful of us can count them one by

one, as it might be, on the fingers of one hand; and how tardy, how wearying, are those where sorrow, and trouble, and despair hold their own.

"Ce qui nous charme s'en va, et ce qui fait peine reste. La rose vit une heure, et le cyprès cent ans."

Portia has gone into an inner room, and now returns with a basin and a sponge. Very gently (and as though afraid each movement may increase his pain) she bathes his arm, glancing up at him every now and then to see if, indeed, she is adding to or decreasing his agony.

If the truth be told, I believe he feels no agony at all, so glad he is to know her touch, and see her face. When she has sponged his arm with excessive tenderness, she brings a cambric handkerchief, and, tearing it into strips, winds it round and round the torn flesh.

"Perhaps that will do until Dr. Bland can see it," she says hopefully. "At least tell me you are in less pain now, and that I have done you some small good."

"Small!" says Fabian.

"Ah! well," she says, lightly, "then I suppose I have succeeded, but you must promise me, nevertheless, that you will have a doctor to look at you."

Her tone is still exquisitely kind; but there is now a studied indifference about it that hurts him keenly. Perhaps in his surprise at this sudden change of manner he overlooks the fact that the difference *is* studied!

"I have given you too much trouble," he says, stupidly, in a leaden sort of way. "But, as you say, you have been successful, I feel hardly any pain now."

"Then I suppose I may dismiss you," she says, with a frugal little smile, just glancing at the half-opened door. The nervousness, the sympathy is over, and she remembers how lost to social consideration is the man to whose comfort she has been contributing for the past twenty minutes.

"I have taken up too much of your time already," he says in a frozen tone, and then he turns and goes toward the door. But, after a moment's reflection, he faces round again abruptly, and comes up to her, and stands before her with set lips and eyes aflame. His nostrils are dilated, there is intense mental pressure discernible in every line of his face.

"I do not mistake you," he says, with slow vehemence; "I am not such a dullard that I should count your bare charity

as friendship. You have succoured me, as you would, of your grace, no doubt have succoured the vilest criminal that walks the earth, were he in death or pain."

She has grown very pale, and is rather frightened, if her eyes speak truly.

"Now that the reaction has set in," he goes on, bitterly, "you believe you have demeaned yourself in that you have assisted one who——"

"You are saying what is not true," she says, in a low but clear voice; speaking slowly, and with difficulty, because her lips are white and dry.

"Am I?" exclaims he, passionately. "Say, if you can, that you believe me innocent of all guilt, and I will believe you!"

He pauses—she is silent. A terrible moment ensues, fraught with agony for Fabian, and still she makes no sign. Her hands, tightly clasped, are hanging before her; her head is turned aside; her eyes persistently seek the floor. As if every nerve in her body is strung to excess, she stands so motionless that she might almost be a statue cut in marble.

Her silence is painfully eloquent. Fabian, in an excess of passion, tears off the cambric bandages from his arm, and flings them at her feet.

"I will have none of your charity," he says, with pale lips, and, throwing wide the door, strides down the corridor, and is soon beyond recall.

When the last echo of his feet has died away Portia rouses herself, and, moving towards a low chair near the fireplace, sinks into it, and presses her hands convulsively against her heart.

Now that she is at last alone, the excitement of the last hour begins to tell upon her. Her cheeks and lips, that up to this have been positively bloodless, now grow dyed with richest crimson, that is certainly not of this earth—earthy, as it gives no promise of health or youthful strength. She leans back in her chair as if exhausted; and, in truth, in the fair shell that harbors her soul but very little power remains to battle with the varied thoughts that rise within her.

Scene by scene the events of the last hour spread themselves before her: the maddened brute rushing violently over the soft, smooth lawn to where the treacherous stream awaits him, running gently between its damp green banks—Sir

Christopher's danger—Fabian's unexpected interference—the short, but terrible fear for him—and then the sudden fall from the extreme agony of suspense to comparative calm.

And yet, perhaps, all this does not haunt her so much as one or two other things, that, in reality, were of little moment. That time, for instance, when he—Fabian—stood beneath the balcony, and when he, with a glance, a half-spoken word, accused her of coldness and indifference. He had condemned her all too willingly. But this was only fair, no doubt. Had not she, in her innermost heart, condemned him, unheard, unquestioned.

And what was it he had said to Dulce? "Take example by your cousin; see how sensible *she* can be," or something like that. Sensible! When this terrible pain was tugging at her heart strings, and prolonged nervousness had made speech impossible.

And why had he said "*your* cousin," instead of "our cousin?" Was it that he did not care to claim kinship with her, or because—because—he did not count himself worthy—to—

Again she raises her hand, and presses it with undue force against her left side. She is unhappy and alone, and full of a vague uncertainty.

"Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows," and all the shadows of her grief seem now to hem her in, and encompass her on every side. The old troublesome pain in her heart, that drove her from the dissipations of town life to seek a shelter in the quiet country, returns to her again. At this moment the pain of which I speak grows almost past endurance. A faint, gray pallor supersedes the vivid carmine of a while ago. She sighs with evident difficulty, and sinks back heavily amongst her cushions.

CHAPTER XII.

"Friendship is constant in all other things,
Save in the office and affairs of love."

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

"I SHOULD think if we are going to give our dance at all, it ought to be soon," says Dulce, with a shrug and a somewhat listless little yawn.

"So we ought," says Dicky Browne, briskly. It seems the most natural thing in the world that he should use the first person plural, and that he should appear to be the chief promoter of the dance in question. "We've been talking of it a considerable lot, you know," he goes on, confidentially, "and they will all think it a dodge on your part if you don't give it within the next fortnight."

"A dodge!" says Miss Blount, very justly incensed. "What dodge?"

"Well, look here," says Dicky—"there once was a fellow—"

He breaks off at this interesting juncture, and, fixing his glass in his best eye, stares at a figure coming slowly towards them from the house. They all follow his gaze, and find themselves criticising the approaching form in a vague, surprised fashion.

"Great hat! look at Julia!" says Dicky, at last, giving way to speech that will not be repressed. The exclamation is quite in keeping with the scene. Julia, in a head gear of the style usually described as a Rubens, of the very largest description, comes simpering up to them, filled with the belief that now, if ever, she is looking her very best. "Great" *is* the word for it. She is indeed all that.

"My dear Julia, where have you been!" says Dulce, ignoring the hat.

"Searching every room in the house for that last book of Ouida's," says Julia, promptly, who has in reality been posing before a mirror in her own room, crowned with a Rubens. "I'm always losing my things, you know—and my way; my boat, for example, and my train, and my umbrella" She is plainly impressed with the belief that she is saying something smart, and looks conscious of it.

"Why don't you add your temper," says Dicky Browne, with a mild smile—which rather spoils the effect of her would-be smartness.

"We were talking about our ball," says Dulce, somewhat quickly. "Dicky seems to think that we shall lose caste in the neighborhood if we put it off much longer."

"You'll create ill feeling," says Mr. Browne. "The Stanley girls have new gowns, and they want to show them. They'll say nasty things about you."

"That's your second hint on that subject," says Sir Mark

"Get it out, Dicky, you are dying to say something. What was it you were going to say a few minutes ago about some fellow who—?"

"Who for seven years was going to give a ball, and was asked everywhere on the strength of it. His friends hoped against hope, don't you see, but nothing ever came of it. At the end of the seven years he was as far off it as ever."

"And what did his friends do to him then," asks Julia, who is one of those people who always want *more* than enough.

"Deponent sayeth not," says Mr. Browne. "Perhaps it was too dark a tale for publication. I suppose they either smote him between the joints of his harness till he died, or else they fell upon him in a body and rent him in pieces."

"What nonsense you can talk at times," says Mrs. Beaufort, mindful of his speech of a few moments ago.

"Not I," says Dicky Browne.

It is about four o'clock, and already the shadows are lengthening upon the grass, the soft, cool grass upon which they are all sitting beneath the shade of the huge chestnut trees, that fling their branches in all directions, some east, some west, some heavenwards.

A little breeze is blowing towards them sweet essences of pinewood and dark fir. Above in the clear sky the fleecy clouds assume each moment a new form—a yet more tender color—now pale blue, now gray, now a soft pink that verges upon crimson. Down far in the hollows a white mist is floating away, away, to the ocean, and there, too, can be seen (playing hide and seek amongst the great trunks of the giant elms) the flitting forms of the children dancing fantastically to and fro.

The scent of dying meadow-sweet is on the air, and the hush and the calm of evening.

"Dulce, command us to have tea out here," says Sir Mark, removing his cigarette from his lips for a moment.

"Dear Dulce, yes; that will be sweet," says Portia, who is very silent and very pale and very beautiful to-day.

"Dicky, go and tell some one to bring tea here directly," says Dulce; "and say they are to bring peaches for Portia, because she loves them, and say anything else you like for yourself."

"Thanks; Curaçoa will do me very nicely," says Dicky, with all the promptitude that distinguishes him.

"And Maraschino," suggests Sir Mark, in the mildest tone.

"And just a suspicion of brandy," puts in Roger, almost affectionately. Overpowered by their amiability and their suggestions, Dicky turns towards the house.

"I fly," he says. "Think of me till my return."

"Do tell them to hurry, Dicky," says Dulce, anxiously. "They are always so slow. And tell them to bring lots of cake."

"You shall have it all in a couple of shakes," says Mr. Browne, encouragingly, if vulgarly.

"What's that?" asks Dulce, meaning reproof. "It isn't English, is it? How soon will it be?"

"Oh—half a jiff," returns he, totally unabashed.

Presently tea is brought, and they are all happy, notably Dicky, who walks round and into the cakes with unceasing fervor.

"By-the-by, I wonder Stephen hasn't been here to-day," says Julia, addressing no one in particular.

"Something better to do, perhaps," says Portia.

"Yes—where *can* he be?" says Dulce, waking into sudden animation. "'Something better to do?' Why, what could that be?"

"Writing sonnets to your eyebrow," answers Roger in an unpleasant tone.

"How clever you are!" retorts she, in a tone even more unpleasant, letting her white lids fall until they half-conceal the scorn in her eyes. *Only* half!

"He is such a jail bird—I beg his pardon, a town bird," says Sir Mark, lazily, "that I didn't think anything could keep him in the country so long. Yet, he doesn't *look* bored. He bears the solitary confinement very well."

"There is shooting, isn't there?" suggests Portia.

"Any amount of it," says Dicky; "but that don't solve the mystery. He couldn't shoot a haystack flying, not if his life depended on it. It's suicide to go out with him! He'd as soon shoot you or me as anything else. I always say the grouse ought to love him; because I don't believe he knows the barrel of his gun from the stock."

"How perfectly dreadful!" exclaims Julia, who always takes everything *au grand serieux*.

"There is other game in the country besides grouse," says Roger, in a peculiar tone.

"I dare say he can't bear to leave that dear old house now he has got into it," says Dulce; "it is so lovely, so quaint, so—"

"Now, is it?" asks Dicky Browne, meditatively. "I've seen nicer, I think. I always feel, when there, as if everything, ceilings, roof and all were coming down on my unfortunate head."

"But it is so old, so picturesque; a perfect dream, *I* think," says Dulce, rather affectedly.

"It isn't half a bad place, but not to be compared to The Moors, surely," says Sir Mark, gently, looking with some reproof at Dulce—reproof the spoiled child resents—The Moors is Roger's home. "I think The Moors one of the most beautiful places in England."

"And one of the draughtiest," says Miss Blount, ungraciously. "I was there once. It was a year ago. It occurred to me, I remember, that the sun had forgotten it; indeed, I had but one thought all the time I stayed."

"And that was?" asks Roger, defiantly.

"How to get away from it again as soon as possible."

"I am sorry my old home found such disfavor in your sight," says Roger, so quietly that remorse wakes within her breast, bringing with it, however, no good result, rather adding fuel to the flame that has been burning brightly since breakfast time. His rebuke is so abominally mild that it brings Miss Blount to the very verge of open wrath.

"I think Stephen such a dear fellow," says Julia, at this critical juncture. "So—er—well read, and that."

"Yes; though, I think, I have known better," says Sir Mark, looking at Dulce.

"Poor Mr. Gower," says that young lady, airily; "everyone seems determined to decry him. What has he done to everybody, and why should comparisons be drawn? There *may* be better people, and there may be worse; but—I like him."

"Lucky he," says Roger, with a faint but distinct sneer, his temper forsaking him; "I could almost wish that I were he."

"I could almost wish it, too," says Dulce, with cruel frankness.

"Thank you." Roger, by this time, is in a very respectable passion, though nobody but he and Dulce have heard the

last three sentences. "Perhaps," he says, deliberately, "it will be my most generous course to resign in favor of—"

"More tea, Portia?" interrupts Dulce, very quickly, in a tone that trembles ever so slightly.

"No, thank you. But, Dulce, I want you near me. Come and sit here."

There is anxiety, mixed with entreaty, in her tone. She has noticed the anger in Roger's face, and the defiance in Dulce's soft eyes, and she is grieved and sorry for them both.

But, Dulce, who is in a very bad mood indeed, will take no notice of either the entreaty or the grief.

"How can I?" she says, with a slow lifting of her brows. "Who will give anybody any tea, if I go away from this? And—" Here she pauses, and her eyes fix themselves upon a break in the belt of firs, low down, at the end of the lawn. "Ah," she says, with a swift blush, "you see I shall be wanted at my post for a little while longer, because—here is Mr. Gower, at last!"

The "at last" is intolerably flattering, though it is a question if the new comer hears it. He is crossing over the soft grass; his hat is in his hand; his eyes dark and smiling. He looks glad, expectant, happy.

"What superflous surprise," says Roger to Dulce, with even a broader sneer than his last. "He always *is* here, isn't he!"

"Yes; isn't it good of him to come," says Miss Blount, with a suspicious dulness—Stephen has not yet come quite close to them. "We are always so wretchedly stupid here, and he is so charming, and so good to look at, and always in such a perfect temper!" As she finishes her sentence she turns her large eyes full on her *fiancé*.

Roger, muttering something untranslatable between his teeth, moves away, and then Gower comes up, and Dulce gives him her hand and her prettiest smile, and presently he sinks upon the grass at her feet, and lies there in a graceful position that enables him to gaze without trouble upon her piquante face. He is undeniably handsome, and is very clean-limbed, and has something peculiar about his smile that takes women as a rule.

"How d'ye do?" he says to Roger presently, when that young man comes within range, bestowing upon him a little

nod. Whereon Roger says the same to him in a tone of the utmost *bonhommie*, which, if hypocritical, is certainly very well done, after which conversation once more flows smoothly onwards.

What were you doing all day?" asks Dulce of the knight at her feet, throwing even kinder feeling than usual into her tone, as she becomes aware that Roger's eyes are fixed upon her.

"Wishing myself here," replies Gower, with a readiness that bespeaks truth.

"What a simple thing to say," murmurs Dulce, with a half-smile, glancing at him from under her long lashes. "But how difficult to believe. After all," with a wilful touch of coquetry, "I don't believe you ever do mean anything you say."

"Don't you," says Gower, with an eagerness that might be born of either passion or amusement. "You wrong me then. And some day—some day, perhaps, I shall be able to prove to you that what I say I mean." Then, probably, the recollection of many things comes to him, and the quick, warm light dies out of his eyes, and it is with an utter change of tone and manner he speaks next.

"Now, tell me what you were doing all day?" he says, lightly.

"Not very much; the hours dragged a little, I think. Just now, as you came to us, we were discussing—" it is almost on her lips the word "you," but she suppresses it in time, and goes on easily—"a dance we must give as soon as possible."

"An undertaking down here, I suppose?" says Gower, doubtfully; "yet a change, after all. And, of course, you are fond of dancing?" with a passing glance, that is almost a caress, at her lithe, svelte figure.

"Yes, very; but I don't care about having a ball here." She says this with a sigh; then she pauses, and a shade saddens her face.

"But why?" asks he, surprised.

"There are many reasons—many. And you might not understand," she says, rather confusedly. She turns her face away from his, and in doing so meets Portia's eyes. She has evidently been listening to what Dulce has just said, and now gives back her cousin's gaze as though against her will. After a moment she slowly averts her face, as if seeking to hide the pallor that is rendering even her lips white.

"Both my evening suits are unwearable," says Dicky Browne, mournfully. "I shall have to run up to town to get some fresh things." He says this deprecatingly, as though utterly assured of the fact that every one will miss him horribly.

"You won't be long away, Dicky, will you?" says Roger, tearfully; at which Dulce, forgetful for the instant of the late feud, laughs aloud.

"I can't think what's the matter with me," says Dicky, still mournful; my clothes don't last any time. A month seems to put 'em out of shape, and make 'em unwearable."

"No wonder," says Sir Mark, "when you get them made by a fellow out of the swim altogether. *Where* does he live? Cheapside or Westbourne Grove?"

"No; the Strand," says Mr. Browne, to whom shame is unknown, "if you mean Jerry."

"Dicky employs Jerry because his name is Browne," says Roger. "He's a hanger-on of the family, and is popularly supposed to be a poor relation, a sort of country cousin. Dicky proudly supports him in spite or public opinion. It is very noble of him."

"The governor sent me to him when I was a young chap—for punishment, I think," says Dicky, mildly, "and I don't like to give him up now. He is such a fetching old thing, and so conversational, and takes such an interest in my nether limbs."

"Who are you talking of in such laudatory terms?" asks Dulce, curiously, raising her head at this moment.

"Of Jerry—my tailor," says Dicky, confidentially.

"Ah! A good man, but—er—tiresome," says Julia, vaguely, with a cleverly suppressed yawn; she is evidently under the impression that they are discussing Jeremy Taylor, *not* the gentleman in the Strand.

"*Is* he good?" asks Dicky, somewhat at sea. "A capital fellow to make trousers, I know, but for his morality I can't vouch.

"I am speaking of the divine, Jeremy Taylor," says Julia, very justly shocked at what she believes to be levity on the part of Dicky. "*He* didn't make trousers, he only made maxims!"

"Poor soul!" says Mr. Browne, with heartfelt pity in his tone, to whom Jeremy Taylor is a revelation, and a sad one "Did he die of 'em?"

Of this frivolous remark Julia deigns to take no notice. And, indeed, they are all too accustomed to Mr. Browne's eccentricities of style to spend time trying to unravel them.

"You haven't yet explained to me the important business that kept you at home all day," Dulce is saying to Mr. Gower. She is leaning slightly forward, and is looking down into his eyes.

"Tenants and a steward, and such like abominations," he says, rather absently. Then, his glance wandering to her little white, slender fingers, that are idly trifling with her fan, "By-the-by," he goes on, "the steward—Mayne, you know—can write with both hands. Odd, isn't it? Just as well with his left as with his right."

"A rather useless accomplishment, I should think."

"I don't know. It occurred to me we should all learn how to do it, in case we should break our arms, or our legs, or anything."

"What on earth would our legs have to do with it," says Miss Blount, with a gay little laugh, which he echoes.

"Oh? well, in case we should sprain our right wrists, then. When Mayne went away I tried if *I* could make use of my left hand, and succeeded rather well. Look here, you hold your hand like this."

"It sounds difficult," says Dulce, doubtfully.

"It isn't though, really. Will you try?" Taking a pencil and an envelope from his pocket, he lays the latter on her knee, and hands her the former. "Now let me hold your hand just at first to guide you, and you will soon see how simple it is. Only practice is required."

"It will take a good deal of practice and a good deal of guidance, I shouldn't wonder," says Miss Blount, smiling.

"That will be my gain," returns he in a low tone. As he speaks he lays his hand on hers, and directs the pencil; so the lesson begins; and so it continues uninterrupted for several minutes; Dulce is getting on quite smoothly; Mr. Gower is plainly interested in a very high degree, when Roger coming up to them, lays his hand lightly upon Dulce's shoulder. He is still passionately angry, and almost unable to control himself. To see Dulce's fingers clasped by those of Gower, however innocently, has fired his wrath, and driven him to open expression of his displeasure.

"If you have forgotten how to write, Dulce," he says in a

low, strained voice, "I daresay it will be possible to find a master to re-instruct you. In the meantime, why trouble Gower?"

"Does it trouble you, Mr. Gower?" asks she, sweetly, looking straight at Stephen and ignoring Roger.

"Need I answer that?" responds he, flushing warmly, and in his turn ignoring Dare.

"Then you need not worry yourself to get me a master, Roger," says Dulce, still quite sweetly. "It is very good of you to wish to take such trouble about me, but you see I have got one already."

"Not a master—a slave!" says Gower, impulsively. There's such evident and earnest meaning in his tone that she colors violently, and, with a rather open manifestation of shrinking, withdraws her hand from his clasp; the pencil falls to the ground, but Roger has turned aside, and this last act on her part is unseen by him.

"Is anything the matter with Roger?" says Gower, slowly.

"What should be the matter with him?" asks she, coldly.

"Do you remember what we were reading yesterday? Do you remember even one particular line? It comes to me now. 'So loving jealous.' You recollect?"

"No; and even if I did, what has it to do with Roger?"

"Nothing—*perhaps*." There is a small fine smile around his lips that incenses her, she scarcely knows why.

"Then what does your quotation mean?"

"Nothing, too, no doubt. Shall we go on with our lesson?"

"No, I am tired of it," she says, petulantly. "I like nothing, I think, for very long." She has grown somewhat restless, and her eyes are wistful. They are following Roger, who has thrown himself at Portia's feet.

"Are your friendships, too, short-lived?" asks Gower, biting his lips. You can see that he is lounging on the grass, and at this moment, having raised his hand, it falls again, by chance upon her instep.

Remorse and regret have been companions of her bosom for the past minute, now they quicken into extreme anger. Pushing back the garden chair on which she has been sitting, she stands up and confronts the stricken Gower with indignant eyes.

"Don't do that again," she says, with trembling lips. Her

whole attitude—voice and expression—are undeniably childish, yet she frightens Gower nearly out of his wits.

"I beg your pardon," he stammers, eagerly, growing quite white. "I must *insist* on your understanding I did not mean it. How could you think it? I—"

At this instant Roger laughs. The laugh comes to Dulce as she stands before Gower grieved and angry and repentant, and her whole face changes. The grief and the repentance vanish, the very anger fades into weariness.

"Yes, I believe you—I was foolish—it doesn't matter," she says, heavily; and then she sinks into her seat again, and taking a small volume of selected poetry from a rustic table at her elbow, throws it into his lap.

"Read me something," she says, gently.

"What shall I select?" asks Stephen, puzzled by the sudden change in her manner, but anxious to please her.

"Anything. It hardly matters; they are all pretty," she says, disconnectedly, and so indifferently that he is fairly piqued; his reading being one of his strongest points; and taking up the book, he opens it at random, and begins to read in a low, sweet, rhyming voice that certainly carries its own charm.

Dulce, in spite of herself, is by degrees drawn to listen to it; yet though the words so softly spoken attract her and chain her attention, there is always a line of discontent around her lovely mouth, and a certain angry petulance within her eyes, and in the gesture with which she furls and unfurls her huge black fan.

Dicky Browne, who has confiscated all the cake, and is therefore free to go where he lists, has drawn near to her, and, under cover of a cigarette, is pretending to be absorbed in the poetry. Gower has fallen now upon Gray's Elegy in a Churchyard, and is getting through it most effectively. All the others have grown silent, either touched by the beauty of the dying daylight, or the tender lines that are falling on the air. When at length Stephen finishes the poem, and his voice ceases to break the stillness of the coming eve, no one stirs, and an utter calm ensues. It is broken by the irrepressible Julia.

"What a charming thing that is," she says, alluding, they presume, to the Elegy. She pauses here, but no one takes her up or seems to care to continue the praise of what is almost beyond it. But Julia is not easily discouraged.

"One can almost see the gaunt trees," she says, sentimentally, "and the ivied walls of the old church, and the meadows beyond, and the tinkling of the tiny bells, and the soft white sheep as they move perpetually onward in the far, far distance."

She sighs, as though overcome by the perfect picture she has so kindly drawn for their benefit.

"I wish to goodness she would move on herself," says Dicky Browne. "It is enough to make poor Gray turn in his grave."

"I think she describes rather prettily, and quite as if she meant it," says Portia, softly.

"Not a bit of it," growls Dicky; "she *don't* mean it; she couldn't: It's all put on—regular plaster! She doesn't feel it; she knows as much about poetry as I do."

"You underrate yourself, my darling boy," says Roger, fondly.

"Oh! you get out," says Mr. Brown, most ungratefully.

"I think to be able to read *really* well is an intense charm," goes on Julia, glancing sweetly at Stephen. "If one had only some one to give one a kindly hint now and then about the correct intonation and emphasis and that, it would be a regular study, of course. I really have half a mind to go in for it."

"So glad she has at last arrived at a just appreciation of her own powers," says Dicky, *sotto voce*. "I should think she has just half a mind and no more, to do anything with."

He is hushed up; and then Stephen goes on again, choosing passages from Shakespeare this time, for a change, while silence once more reigns.

Roger is looking sulky and unkindly critical. Sir Mark has been guilty of a small yawn or two. Julia, in spite of the most heroic efforts to the contrary, is openly and disgracefully sleepy. Portia's eyes are full of tears. Dicky Browne, who is tired of not hearing his own voice, and whose only belief in the divine William is, that he gave him "a jolly lot of trouble in his schooldays," is aweary, and is only waiting an opportunity to cut in and make himself heard, in spite of all opposition.

It comes—the opportunity—and Dicky seizes it. Mr. Gower is at his very best. He has thrown his whole soul into his voice, and is even himself wrapt up in the piece he has before him.

"'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,'" his voice rings out clear and full of melancholy prophecy; it is a voice that should have impressed any right-minded individual, but Dicky's mind is below par.

"I should think he'd lie considerably more uneasy without it," he says, cheerfully. "He'd feel like being scalped, wouldn't he? And get dreaming about Comanches and tomahawks and Fenimore Cooper, eh?"

For once Dicky scores. The men have grown tired of Mr. Gower's performance, and hail the interruption with delight. Roger turns on his side, and laughs aloud. This attention, so unprecedented on his part, fills Dicky's soul with rapture. He instantly bestows upon his supporter a smile rich with gratitude; yet perhaps it is not Mr. Browne's wit alone that has called forth such open manifestation of mirth from Roger. There is, I think, just the faintest touch of malice in his merriment.

And then the faithless Dulce laughs too; the most musical, ringing little laugh in the world, but none the less galling for all its sweetness. It is the last straw. Mr. Gower, suppressing a very natural inclination, lays the book down gently on the grass beside him (he would have given anything to be able to fling it far from him), and makes some casual remark about the excessive beauty of the evening.

And, indeed, it is beautiful; all down the Western slope of the fir-crowned hill, the fading rays of light still wander, though even now in the clear heavens the evening star has risen, and is shining calm and clear as a soul entered on its eternal rest.

"Will you not read us something else?" says Dulce, feeling a little ashamed of herself.

"Some other time," returns he.

"Dicky rather took the sentiment out of it," says Roger, still maliciously mirthful. "I hardly think he and the Swan of Avon would be congenial souls."

"Well, I don't know," says Sir Mark, lazily. "We have been taught that extremes meet, you see."

"Dicky, how can you stand their impertinence?" asks Dulce, gaily. "Assert yourself, I entreat you."

"There is such a thing as silent contempt," says Mr. Browne, untouched by their darts. "There is also a passage somewhere that alludes to an 'unlettered small-knowing

soul;' I do not desire to quote it in this company. Let us return to the immortal Bill."

But they are all laughing still, and in the face of laughter, it is difficult to get back to tragedy. And so no one encourages Gower to continue his work, and this, in despite of the fact that the light growing as it is toward the gloaming, seems in keeping with dismal tales and softly-mouthed miseries.

Every moment the evening star grows brighter, gaining glory as the day declines. The mist has died away into the ocean, the breeze has sunk to slumber, only the song of many birds hymning themselves to roost amongst the quiet thickets disturbs the tranquility of the air.

Dead leaves that speak of Autumn and coming dissolution float toward the loiterers on the lawn, and, sinking at their feet, preach to them a lesson of the life that lasts not, and of that other life that in all its splendor may yet dawn upon them.

A soft and sullen roar from the ocean makes the silence felt. The sea, clothed round with raiment of white waves, and rich with sparkling life, dashing itself along the beach, breathes a monotonous murmur that wafts itself inland and falls with vague music upon the listening ear. Thoughts arise within the breast, born of the sweet solemnity of the hour, and the sadness that belongs to all life—but in this changeable world nothing lasts, and presently seeing something in the lawn below that puzzles her sight, Julia says, quickly: "What are the moving forms I see down there?"

"Only the children undulating," says Mr. Browne, promptly.

"What?" says Sir Mark.

"I have said!" returns Dicky.

"There is surely something besides children," says Portia, trying to pierce the gathering darkness. "See, what is that coming towards us now?"

They all peer eagerly in the direction of the firs, from between which a flying mass may be seen emerging, and approaching rapidly to where they are all seated.

"It is only Jacky on his fact," says Mr. Browne, at length, after a careful examination of this moving form.

"On what?" asks Roger, curiously.

'His fact," repeats Dicky, unmoved.

"What's that?" asks Jacky's mamma, somewhat anxiously —if a careless, it must be to her credit said, that Julia is a very kindly mother, and is now rather upset by Mr. Browne's mysterious declaration.

"You ought to know; you gave it to him," declares he "He's sitting on it anyhow."

"Really, Dicky, we must ask you to explain yourself," says Sir Mark, with dignity.

"Why, its only a donkey," says Dulce, "and Jacky is riding him."

"Just so," says Mr. Browne, equably; "and a very large donkey, too; I always call them facts because they are stubborn things. At least, that one is, because I rode it yesterday—at least I tried to—and it behaved very ill indeed. It's—it's a very nasty animal, and painfully unamiable."

"What did it do to you?" asks Julia, who is again in secret fear about her first born, who every moment draws more near.

"Well, I got on him, incited thereto by Jacky and the Boodie, and when I had beaten him unceasingly for a full quarter of an hour, in the vain hope of persuading him to undertake even a gentle walk, he turned treacherously to the right, and squeezed my best leg against the garden wall. I bore it heroically, because I knew the Boodie was regarding me sternly, but I could have wept bitterly; I don't know if all walls are the same, but the *garden* wall hurts very much."

"I wonder where Dicky gets all his stories," says Dulce, admiringly.

"He evolves them out of his inner consciousness," replies Sir Mark.

Meantime, Jacky draws nearer and nearer. He advances on the donkey—and on them, at a furious pace. Surely, never was a lazy ass so ridden before! Perhaps those watching him are under the impression that when closer to them he will guide his steed to their right or to their left, or at least steer clear of them in some way, but if so they are mistaken.

Jacky is in his element. He gallops wildly up to them, with arms and legs flying north and south, and his cap many miles behind. That hidden sense that tells the young and artless one that the real meaning of all fun is to take some one by surprise and frighten the life out of him, is full upon him now.

"Out of my way," he shrieks, in frenzied accents almost, as he bears down upon them. "Out of my way, I say, or he'll kill you; I can't pull him in. He is running away with me!"

With this the wily young hypocrite gives the donkey a final kick with his right heel, and dashes ungallantly into the very midst of them.

The confusion that follows is all his heart can desire. Great indeed is the rout. Camp chairs are scattered broadcast; shawls strew the lawn; Julia flies to the right, Dulce to the left; Portia instinctively finds refuge behind Dicky Browne, who shows great gallantry on this memorable occasion, and devotes himself to the service of the frail and weak. Indeed, it is on record, that, in the height of his zeal, he encircled Portia's waist with his arm, and cried aloud to the foe to "come on," as he waited for victory or death.

Jacky flies past, and is presently seen urging on his wild career in the little glade that leads to the wood. Once more they breathe, and order is restored, to Gower's deep regret, as he has managed, in the *melee*, to seize hold of Dulce's hand, and in an abstracted fashion has held it ever since.

"That boy deserves a sound whipping," says Sir Mark, indignantly, who is, nevertheless, a sworn friend of the graceless Jacky.

"You hear, Julia; you are to whip him at once?" says Roger.

"Whip him!" says Mrs. Beaufort, resentfully. "Indeed I shall not. I never whipped one of them in my life, and I never shall."

"You'd be afraid," says Dicky Browne. "You should see Julia when the Boodie attacks her; she literally goes into her boots, and stays there. It is, indeed, a pitiable exhibition. By-the-by, does anybody want dinner; because, if so, he may as well go and dress. It is quite half-past six."

CHAPTER XIII.

"A vague unrest
And a nameless longing filled her breast."

TIME, as a rushing wind, slips by, and brings us Dulce's ball. The night is lovely and balmy as any evening in the Summer months gone by, though now September shakes the leaves to their fall. A little breeze sweeps up from the ocean, where the "lights around the shore" show mystical and bright; while overhead, all down the steeps of heaven, myriad stars are set, to flood the sleeping world with their cold, clear beauty.

Upon the walls, and all along the balconies, lie patches of broken moonshine; and in the garden the pale beams revel and kiss the buds until they wake; and "all flowers that blow by day come forth, as t'were high noon."

In the library the lamps are lowered. Nobody has come down-stairs yet, and the footman, giving the last lingering touch to the little sweet gossiping fire that warns them of Winter's approach, turns to leave the room. On the threshold, however, he stands aside to let Miss Vibart enter.

She is dressed in a white satin gown, creamy in shade, and rather severe in its folds. Some pale water-lilies lie upon it, as though cast there by some lucky chance, and cling to it lovingly, as if glad to have found so soft a resting place. There is no flower in her hair, and no jewels anywhere, except three rows of priceless pearls, that clasp her slender throat. Throwing her gloves and fan upon the centre table, she walks slowly to a mirror, and examines herself somewhat critically.

As if ungratefully dissatisfied with the lovely vision it presents to her, she turns away again, with an impatient sigh, and trifles absently with a paper knife near her. There is a discontented line about her mouth, a wistful, restless expression in her eyes. She moves slowly, too, as if gladness is far from her, and shows, in every glance and movement, a strange amount of languor.

As though her thoughts compel her to action, she walks aimlessly from place to place; and now, as if she is listening for something to come; and now, as if she is trying to make

up her mind to take some step from which she shrinks in secret.

At last, drawing her breath with a sudden quickness, born of determination, she opens a drawer in a cabinet, and, taking from it a little volume in the Tauchnitz binding, she opens the library door, and, turning to the right, walks swiftly down the corridor.

From out the shadow a figure advances toward her, a figure bent and uncomely, that tries in vain to avoid the meeting with her, and to get out of sight before recognition sets in.

It is the old man Slyme. As she sees him there returns to Portia the memory of many other times when she has met him here in this corridor, with apparently no meaning for his presence. Some unaccountable and utterly vague feeling of dislike for this man has been hers ever since she first saw him. He is repugnant to her in a remarkable degree, considering how little he has to do with her life in any way.

"He seems to haunt this part of the house," she says to herself now, uncomfortably. "If I were Fabian I should hate to know there was a chance of meeting him every time I opened my door. Has he, perhaps, a passion for Fabian—or—"

Instinctively she throws an additional touch of hauteur into her shapely head, and without deigning to notice the old man, sweeps by him, her glimmering white skirts making a gentle *frou-frou* as she goes.

When she has passed, the secretary raises his eyes and watches her departing form, furtively. There is great cunning mixed with malignity and resentment in his glance. He mutters something inaudible, that carries no blessing in its tone, but yet, as though fascinated by her beauty, he stands still and follows each step she takes upon the polished oaken flooring.

As she stops at a particular door, his whole face changes, and satisfied malice takes the place of resentment.

"Even such pride can stoop," he mutters, with a half-drunken chuckle. "And it is I, my fine lady—who can scarce breathe when I am by—that have power to ring your proud heart."

He turns, and shambles onwards towards his own den.

Portia's steps have grown slower as she gets nearer to the

door before which Slyme has seen her stop. Her eyes have sought the ground; all along the floor her image may be seen, lengthened, but clear; almost with every step she seems to tread upon herself. As she reaches the door she hesitates, and then lifts her hand as if with the intention of knocking. But again she pauses, and her hand drops to her side. As if more nervous than she cares to own, she leans against the lintel of the door, as one might, desirous of support.

Then the weakness vanishes; fastening her teeth upon her under lip, she rouses herself, and tapping gently but distinctly upon one of the panels, awaits an answer.

Presently she gets it. "Come in," says Fabian's voice, clear, indifferent; and slowly turning the handle she enters the room.

The lamps are alight; a fire is burning in the grate. At the upper table of this room, that is his study, his very *sanctum sanctorum*, Fabian is sitting with some papers and books before him.

At first, being unconscious of who his visitor is, he does not lift his head, but now, seeing her, he rises quickly to his feet, and says,

"You!" in accents of the most acute surprise.

She is standing barely inside the door with the little volume pressed closely, almost convulsively, between her fingers, and for a moment makes him no reply. It is the first time they have ever been alone since that day when he had injured his arm through the running away of Sir Christopher's mare.

Now, his face, his tone, is so unfriendly that a great fear falls upon her. Is he very angry with her still? Has she sinned past forgiveness? Will he, perhaps, order her to leave the room? She tries to rally her power of resistance against what fate—relentless, implacable—is preparing for her; but in vain. A terrible fear of him (the man regarding her with such stern eyes) and of herself crushes her. Her heart dies within her; what evil has fallen upon her days, that *once* were happy? and yet—and yet—of what—what exquisite sweetness is this evil formed!

She flushes, first painfully; and then the flush fades, and pallor holds full sway.

"I can do something for you?" asks Fabian, not advanc-

ing toward her, not letting even one kindly accent warm his frozen tone, and this when the silence has grown positively unbearable.

"Thank you—no." Her little cold hands are nervously twined around the book she holds. Speech has cruelly deserted her; a sob has risen in her throat, and she is battling with it so fiercely, that for a moment she can say nothing. Then she conquers, and almost piteously she lays the book upon the very edge of the table nearest her, and says with difficulty:

"I brought you this. At breakfast this morning you said you had not read it; and to-night I knew you would be alone, and I thought—it is 'The Europeans'—it might help you to while away an hour."

Her voice dies away and again silence follows it. She is really frightened now. She has met many men. has been the acknowledged beauty of a London season, has had great homage laid at her feet; but no man has had power to make her heart waken, until she met this man, upon whom disgrace lies heavy. It is *Kismet!* She feels cold now, and miserable, and humbled before him who should surely be numbled before her. What has she meant by coming to his room without so much as an invitation; to him—who in her sight is guilty, indeed, of an offense not to be forgiven in the world.

She grows tired and very weary, and the old pain at her heart, that always comes to her when she is miserable or perplexed, is tormenting her now, making her feel sick of life and dispirited.

"It was kind of you to think of me," says Fabian, coldly; "*too* kind. But there are some matters of importance I must get through to-night, and I fear I shall not have time for fiction."

She takes up the book again, the little instrument that betrays his determination to accept no benefits at her hands, and moves toward the door.

Coming quickly up to her, that he may open the door, he stands between her and it, and stops her.

"As you are here," he says, "let me look at you. Remember, I have never seen you dressed for a ball before."

As if astonished at his request, she stands quite still, and, letting her round, bare arms hang loosely before her, with

her hands clasped, she lets him gaze at her sweet fairness in utter silence. It takes him some time. Then—

"You are very pale," he says—no more. Not a word of praise escapes him. She is woman enough to feel chagrin at this, and discontent. Has her glass lied to her, then? One small word of approbation, even about her gown, would have been sweet to her at this moment. *Is* she so very pale? Is it that this white gown does not become her? A quick dislike to the beautiful robe—and only an hour ago she had regarded it with positive affection—now takes possession of her.

"I am always pale," she says, with subdued resentment.

"Not always. To-night one hardly knows where your *dress* ends, and where *you* begin." She has hardly time to wonder if this is a compliment or the other thing, when he goes on again: "I don't think I ever saw you in white before?" he says.

"No; and it is probable you will never see me in it again," she says, petulantly. "I dislike it. It is cold and unbecoming, I think."

"No, not unbecoming."

"Well," she says, impatiently, "not becoming, at least."

"That, of course, is quite a matter of taste," he says, indifferently.

She laughs unpleasantly. To *make* him give a decided opinion upon her appearance has now grown to be a settled purpose with her. She moves her foot impatiently upon the ground, then, suddenly, she lifts her eyes to his—the large, sweet, wistful eyes he has learned to know so well, and that now are quick with defiance—and says, obstinately:

"Do *you* think it suits me?"

He pauses. And then a peculiar smile that, somehow, angers her excessively, grows round his lips and lingers there.

"Yes," he answers, slowly; "you are looking admirably—you are looking all you can possibly desire to-night.

She is deeply angered. She turns abruptly aside, and, passing him, goes quickly to the door.

"I beg your pardon," he says, hastily, following her, with a really contrite expression on his face. "Of course I know you did not want me to say that—yet—what was it you did want me to say? You challenged me, you know."

"I am keeping you from your work," says Portia, quietly.

"Go back to it. I know I should not have come here to disturb you, and—"

"Do not say that," he interrupts her, eagerly. "I deserve it, I know, but *do not*. I have lost all interest in my work. I cannot return to it to-night. And that book you brought, let me have it now, will you? I shall be glad of it by-and-by."

Before she can refuse, a sound of footsteps without makes itself heard; there is a tinkling, as of many bangles, and then the door is thrown wide, and Dulce enters.

She is looking very pretty in a gown of palest azure. There is a brightness, a joyousness, about her that must attract and please the eye; she is, indeed,

> "One not tired with life's long day, but glad
> I' the freshness of its morning."

"I have come to say good-night to you, Fabian," she says, regarding her brother with loving, wistful eyes. "I suppose I shan't be able to see you again until to-morrow. Promise me you will go to bed, and to sleep, *soon*."

"That is the very simplest promise one can give," returns he, mockingly. "Why should not one sleep?" Then, seeing the extreme sadness that has settled on her *mignonne* face, that should, by right, only be glad with smiles, goes on more gently: "Be happy; I shall do all you ask me."

"Ah, Portia, you here, too," says Dulce, smiling gratefully at her. "How sweet you are looking to-night—and your gown—how perfect. Isn't it lovely, Fabian?"

"Quite lovely," slowly.

"And she herself, too," goes on Dulce, enthusiastically, "isn't *she* lovely, as well?"

"Yes," says Fabian, still more slowly.

"She is like a dream of snow, or purity—or something," says Dulce, vaguely, but admiringly.

"Or ice?" says Fabian.

"Oh, *no*, not *ice*. It is too hard, too unsympathetic, too cold."

"They are both cold, are they not?" says Portia, with a very faint smile. "Both ice and snow."

"Dulce, Dulce!" calls somebody, from without.

"Now, who *is* that," says Miss Blount, irritably. "Roger, of *course*. I really never am allowed one moment to myself

when he is in the house. He spends his entire time, first calling me, and then quarreling with me when he finds me. He does it on purpose, I think. He can't bear me to have even one peaceful or happy instant. I never met any one so utterly provoking as Roger."

She runs to him, nevertheless, and Portia moves as if to follow her.

"Don't leave me in anger," entreats Fabian, in some agitation, detaining her by a gesture full of entreaty. "Do anything but that. Think of the long hours I shall have to put in here, by myself, with nothing but my own thoughts; and say something kind to me before you go."

"You forget," she says, with slow reproach, her eyes on the ground. "How can you hope for anything—even one word—sympathetic from *ice*. Let me go to Dulce."

"You *shall* not leave me like this," dictates he, desperately, shutting the door with sudden passion, and deliberately placing his back against it. "Am I not sufficiently unhappy that you should seek to make me even more so; to add, indeed, a very crown to my misery. I will not face the long night alone with this fresh grief! The remembrance of your face as it now looks at me, of your eyes, so calm, so unforgiving, would fill the weary hours with madness. *You* don't know what it is to endure the pangs of Tantalus, to have a perpetual hunger at your heart that can never be satisfied. *I* do. I have suffered enough. You must be friends with me before you go."

"I came to make friends with you. I wanted to be friends with you, and—"

"Yes, I know. I received you ungraciously; I grant it; but was there nothing for *me* to forgive? And even if I was unpardonably ungrateful for your kindness, is that so heavy a crime that I should be punished for it with what is worse than death? Portia, I entreat you, once again, put your hand in mine before you leave me."

He is very pale, and there is a very agony of expectation in his dark eyes. But yet she stands irresolute, not seeing his agony, because her head is bent, with her fair arms still hanging before her, with her fingers closely intertwined.

He can look unrebuked upon her beauty, upon the rounded whiteness of her arms, upon the tumultuous rise and fall of her bosom, upon the little shapely, perfect head, that might well have graced a throne.

Each rich charm in her lovely downcast face is clear to him; a great yearning takes possession of his breast, an unconquerable desire to tell her all he feels for her. There have been moments when he has thought he *must* fall at her feet, and laying hold of the hem of her garment, cry aloud to her from out his heart's wild longing, "I have gone mad! I love you! Let me die!"

This is such a moment. Oh! to be able to take her in his arms for even one brief instant, and hold her close to his breaking heart—this silent girl, with her pride, and her beauty, and her cruel tenderness.

He sighs heavily, and turns his head away. Still no word escapes her. She might almost be cut in marble, so quiet, so motionless she stands. Is she indifferent to his pain; or careless of it—or ignorant?

"Go, then," he says, without looking at her, in a voice from which all warmth and feeling of any sort, be it anger or regret, has flown. "There is no reason at all why you should waste even one kind word or touch upon me. I was mad to ask it."

At this, life returns to her. Her lips quiver; she lifts her eyes to his, and such is the force of her regard that he is constrained, sorely against his will, to return it. Then he can see her eyes are full of tears—great liquid loving drops that tremble to their fall; and even as he watches them, in painful wonder, they part from her lids and run all down her pale but rounded cheeks.

She holds out to him, not one, but *two* hands. His whole face changes; a gladness, that has in it something of heaven, fills his eyes.

Taking the little trembling hands softly in his own, he lays them on his beating heart.

For a moment only, then he lets them fall; and then, before this divine joy has quite left him, he finds himself, once more alone.

CHAPTER XIV.

"What sudden anger's this? How have I reaped it? He parted frowning from me, as if ruin leaped from his eyes."—SHAKESPEARE.

THE night wears on. By this time everybody is either pleased or disappointed with the evening. For the most part, of course, they looked pleased, because frowns are unbecoming; but, then, looks go for so little.

Julia, who has impounded a middle-aged baronet, is radiant. The middle-aged baronet is not! He evidently regards Julia as a sort of modern albatross, that hangs heavily to his neck, and withers beneath her touch. She has been telling him all about her early life in India, and her troubles, and the way she suffered with her servants, and various other private matters; and the poor baronet doesn't seem to see it, and is very fatigued indeed. But Julia has him fast, and so there is little hope for him.

Dulce and Roger have been at open war ever since the second dance. From their eyes, when directed at each other, have darted forked lightning since that fatal dance.

"If they could only have been kept apart for 'this night only,'" says Sir Mark, in despair, "all might have been well; but the gods ordained otherwise."

Perhaps the careless gods had Stephen Gower's case in consideration; at all events, that calm young man, profiting by the dispute between the betrothed pair, has been making decided, if smothered, love to Dulce, all the evening.

By this time, indeed, the whole room has noticed his infatuation, and covert remarks about the probability of her carrying on to a successful finish her first engagement are whispered here and there.

Sir Christopher is looking grave and anxious. Some kind friend has been making him as uncomfortable about Dulce's future as circumstances will permit.

Meanwhile, Dulce herself, with a bright flush upon her cheeks and a light born of defiance in her blue-green eyes, is dancing gaily with Stephen, and is looking charming enough to draw all eyes upon her.

Dicky Browne, of course, is in his element. He is dancing with everybody, talking to everybody, flirting with everybody, and is, as he himself declares, "as jolly as a sand boy." He is making love indiscriminately all round—with old maids and young—married and single—with the most touching impartiality.

"Dicky is like the bee amongst the flowerets. By Jove, if he improves the shining hours, he ought to make a good match yet," says Dicky's papa, who has condescended to forsake his club for one night, and grace Dulce's ball with his somewhat attenuated charms.

As the above speech will prove, Mr. Browne senior's

knowledge of Watts and Tommy Moore is limited and decidedly mixed.

Among all the fair women assembled at the Hall to-night, to Portia, beyond dispute, must the golden apple be awarded. She is still pale, but exceedingly beautiful. The wistful, tired expression that darkens her eyes only serves to heighten her loveliness, and throw out the delicate tinting of her fair skin. Dulce, noticing her extreme pallor, goes up to her, and whispers gently:

"You are tired, darling. Do not dance any more, unless you wish it."

"I am not sure, I *don't* wish it; I don't exactly know what it is I *do* wish," says Portia, with a rather broken smile. "I daresay, like most other things in this life, I shall find out all about it when it is too late. But finish your waltz, dearest, and don't puzzle your brain about me."

All the windows are thrown wide open. Outside the heavens are alight with stars. The air is heavy with the breath of dying flowers, and the music—faint and low at times, and again wild and sweet—rises and swells as the director waves to and fro his magic wand.

Inside, in the conservatories, the lamps are burning low; the tender blossoms are hanging down their heads. Between the dark green branches of the shrubs, lights blue and red and yellow gleam softly. In the distance may be heard the plaintive drip-drip of many fountains.

Roger, passing through one of the halls, and seeing Dulce and Mr. Gower standing before a huge Chelsea bowl of flowers, stops short, hesitates, and then, *bon gre mal gre*, goes up to them and makes some trivial remark that neither deserves an answer nor gets one.

Dulce is apparently wrapped up in the contemplation of a flower she has taken from the old bowl—that looks something like an indoor Marguerite; she is plucking it slowly to pieces, and as she so mutilates it, whispers softly the incantation that will help to declare her fortune:

"Il m'aime—un peu—beaucoup—passionément—pas du tout. Il m'aime—un peu—"

The petals are all gone; nothing remains but the very heart of the poor flower, which now, as she breaks it mercilessly in two, flutters sadly to her feet, and dies there.

"Yes—just so," she says, with a little hostile glance at

Roger, distinctly seen by Gower—"and such a very little, that it need hardly count!"

"What an unsatisfactory lover," says Roger, rather satirically, returning her glance with interest. "Of whom were you thinking?"

"My dear Roger, you forget," says Miss Blount, with admirable promptitude; "how could I think of any one in that light! I have never had a lover in my life. I have only had —*you!*" She says this slowly, and lets her lids fall half over her eyes, that are now gleaming with undue brilliancy.

"True!" replies Dare, with maddening concurrence, stroking his mustache softly.

"*Isn't* Roger charming," says Dulce (her own manner deeply aggravating in its turn), tapping Gower's arm lightly and confidentially with her fan; *so* honest and withal *so* gracious."

"A compliment from you is, indeed, worth having," says Roger, who is in a dreadful temper; "but a truce to them now. By-the-by, were you really thinking of me just now when you plucked that unoffending flower to pieces? I can hardly bring myself to believe it."

"If not of you, of whom should I be thinking?" retorts she, calmly but defiantly.

"Well—Gower, for example," says Roger, with a sneering laugh, and unpardonable bad taste. "*He* looks as though he could do a lover's part at a moment's notice, and without the slightest effort."

As he makes this objectionable little speech, he turns on his heel and leaves them.

Dulce, crimson, and with her breath coming somewhat quickly, still lets her eyes meet Gower's bravely.

"I must ask you to excuse my cousin," she says, quietly. "How warm the rooms are; is there no air anywhere, I wonder?"

"On the balcony there is," says Gower, gently. "Shall we go there for a minute or two?"

She lays her hand upon his arm, and goes with him through the lighted, heavily-perfumed rooms on to the balcony, where the cool air is blowing, and where the fresh scent from the waving pines makes itself felt.

The moon is sailing in all its grandeur overhead. Below, the world is white with its glory. The music of many rivu-

lets, as they rush sleepless to the river, sounds sweeter far than even the strains of the band within.

It is past midnight. The stars are growing pale. Already the "world's heart" begins to throb,

> "And a wind blows,
> With unknown freshness over lands and seas."

Something in the silence and majesty of the hour. and something, perhaps, within her own heart, brings the unbidden tears to Dulce's eyes.

"What can be the matter with Roger?" asks Stephen, presently, in a low tone. "We used to be such good friends, long ago. I never saw anyone so changed. He *used* to be a genial sort of fellow." The emphasis is very expressive.

"Used he?" says Dulce, in a somewhat expressionless tone.

"Yes; a right down good sort."

"Is he so very bad now?" says Dulce, deliberately and dishonestly ignorant.

"To you—yes."

There is a pause.

"I think I hardly understand you," she says, in a tone that should have warned him to be silent.

"Have you forgotten the scene of a moment since?" he asks her, eagerly. "His voice, his glance, his whole manner were unbearable; you bore it like an angel—but—why should you bear *anything?* Why should you trouble yourself about him at all? Why not show that you care as little for him as he cares for—"

"Go on," says Dulce, imperiously.

"As he cares for *you*, then," says Stephen, recklessly.

"You have been studying us to some purpose, evidently," exclaims Dulce, turning to him with extreme bitterness. "I suppose, indeed, you are not alone in your judgment. I daresary it is apparent to the whole world that I am a matter of perfect indifference to—to—my cousin!"

"'Who runs may read,'" says Stephen with quiet determination. "Why should I lie to you? He must be blind and deaf, I think—it is not to be accounted for in any other way. Why, that other morning in the garden, you remember how he then—"

"I remember nothing," interrupts she, haughtily, turning away from him, deep offence in her eyes.

But he follows her.

"Now you are angry with me," he says, miserably, trying to look into her averted face.

"Why should I be angry?" she says, petulantly. "Is it because you tell me Roger does not care for me? Do you think I did not know that before? It is, indeed, a question with me whether I am or am not an object of aversion to the man I have promised to marry."

"You speak very hardly," he says.

"I speak what is in my heart," says Dulce, tremulously.

"Nevertheless, I should not have said what I did," says Stephen, remorsefully, "I know that. Whatever I might have thought, I should have kept it to myself; but"—in a low tone—"it maddens me to see you give yourself voluntarily to one incapable of appreciating the treasure that has fallen to his share—a treasure beyond price—when there are others who, for a word, a glance, a smile, would barter—"

He pauses. His voice is trembling. His eyes are bent upon the ground as though he is half afraid to meet her glance. There is genuine feeling in his tone.

Dulce, impressed by his open agitation, in spite of herself, leans over the balcony, and lets her fingers wander nervously amongst the leaves of the Virginian creeper that has intertwined itself in the ironwork, and is now fluttering within her reach. It is gleaming blood-red beneath the kiss of the fickle moonbeams, that dance hither and thither amidst its crimson foliage.

Plucking two or three of the reddest leaves, she trifles with them gently, and concentrating all her attention on them, gives herself an excuse for avoiding Stephen's earnest gaze. Her hands are unsteady. She is affected by the sincerity of his manner; and just now, too, she is feeling hurt and wounded, and, perhaps, a little reckless. Her self-pride (that dearest possession of a woman) has sustained a severe shock; for the first time she has been awakened to the fact that the whole country considers her as naught in the eyes of the man whose wife she has promised to be.

To prove to the country that she is as indifferent to Roger as he (it appears) is to her, becomes a settled desire within her heart; the more she dwells upon this, the more sweet it seems to her that there should be another man willing to be her slave; another in whose sight she is all that a woman should be, and to whom each tone of her voice, each glance of her soft eyes, is as a touch of heaven!

Her silence emboldening Gower, he bends over her, and lays his hand upon the slender fingers that are still holding the scarlet leaves of the Virginian creeper.

"Do you understand me?" he asks, nervously.

"Yes."

She feels almost constrained to answer him honestly, so compelling is the extreme earnestness of his manner.

"It seems a paltry thing now to say that I love you," goes on Gower in an impassioned tone that carries her away with it, now that she is sore at heart; "You *know* that. You have known it for weeks." He puts aside with a gesture her feeble attempt at contradiction. "Every thought of my heart is yours; I live only in the hope that I shall soon see you again. Tell me now honestly, would it be possible to break off this engagement with your cousin?"

At this she shrinks a little from him, and a distressed look comes into her beautiful eyes.

"What are you saying?" she says, in a half-frightened way. "It has been going on for so long, this engagement—*always*, as it seems to me. How should I break it off? And then there is Uncle Christopher, he would be unhappy; he would not forgive, and—besides—"

Her voice dies away. Memory vague but sharp, comes to her. If she should now deliberately discard Roger, how will it be with her in the future? And yet what if he should be glad of his freedom; should welcome it with open arms? If, indeed, he should be only waiting for her to take the initiative, and give him his release!

This reflection carries its sting; there is madness in it. She closes her lips firmly, and her breath comes quickly and uncertainly.

"It will be better for you later on," breaks in Gower, tempting her, surely but quietly. "When you are married—it is all very well for you now, when escape at any moment is possible; but when you are irrevocably bound to an unloving husband how will it be with you? Other women have tried it, and how has it ended with them? Not as it will with you, I know; you are far above the many; but still your life will drag with you—there will be no joy! no sympathy! no—Dulce have pity on yourself (I do not say on *me*), and save yourself while you can."

She makes a last faint protest.

"How do you *know* he does not love me?" she asks, painfully. "How can you be sure?—and at least"—wistfully—"we are accustomed to each other, we have known each other all our lives, and we have quarrelled *so* hard already that we can scarcely do anything more—the worst with us is over."

"It will be different then," says Gower—he is speaking from his heart in all honesty. "Now you belong to him only in an improbable fashion; then—"

"It is your belief that he does not love me at all?" interrupts she, tapping her foot impatiently upon the ground.

"It is my belief," returns he slowly.

Almost as he speaks, some one steps from the lighted room beyond on the balcony and approaches them. It is Roger.

"This is ours, I think," he says, addressing Dulce, and alluding to the waltz just commencing.

"Is it—what a pity; I had quite forgotten," she says, wilfully. "I am afraid I have half promised it to Mr. Gower, and you know *he* dances charmingly."

The emphasis not to be mistaken. The remark, of course, is meant alone for Roger, and he alone hears it. Gower has gone away from them a yard or two and is buried in thought. As Roger dances divinely her remark is most uncalled for and vexes him more than he would care to confess.

"Don't let me interfere with you and your new friend," he says, lifting his brows. "If you want to dance all night with Gower, by all means do it; there is really no earthly reason why you shouldn't."

Here, as his own name falls upon his ears, Gower turns and looks at Roger expectantly.

"I absolve you willingly from your engagement to me," goes on Roger, his eyes fixed upon his wilful cousin, his face cold and hard. The extreme calmness of his tone misleads her. Her lips tighten. A light born of passionate anger darkens her gray eyes.

"Do you?" she says, a peculiar meaning in her tone.

"From this engagement only," returns he, hastily.

"Thank you. Of your own free will, then, you resign me, and give me permission to dance with whom I will."

The warm blood is flaming in her cheeks. He has thrown her over very willingly. He is evidently glad to escape the

impending waltz. How shall she be avenged for this indignity?"

"Mr. Gower," she says, turning prettily to Stephen, "will you get me out of my difficulty? and will you dance this waltz with me? You see," with a brave effort to suppress some emotion that is threatening to overpower her, "I have to throw myself upon your mercy."

"You confer a very great honor upon me," says Gower, gently. The courtesy of his manner is such a contrast to Roger's ill-temper, that the latter loses the last grain of self-control he possesses. There is, too, a little smile of conscious malice upon Gower's lips that grows even stronger as his eyes rest upon the darkened countenance of his whilom friend. His whilom friend, seeing it, lets wrath burn even fiercer within his breast.

"You are not engaged to any one else?" says Dulce, sweetly, forgetting how a moment since she had told Roger she had half promised Gower the dance in question.

"Even if I was, I am at *your* service now and always," says Gower.

"As my dancing displeases you so excessively," says Roger, slowly, "it seems a shame to condemn you to keep the rest of your engagements with me. I think I have my name down upon your card for two more waltzes. Forget that, and give them to Gower, or any one else that suits you. For my part, I do not care to—" He checks himself too late.

"Go on," says Dulce, coldly, in an ominously calm fashion. "You had more to say, surely; you do not care to dance them with *me* you meant to say. Isn't it?"

"You can think as you wish, of course."

"All the world is free to do that. Then I may blot your name from my card for the rest of the evening?"

"Certainly."

"If those dances are free, Miss Blount, may I ask you for them?" says Stephen, pleasantly.

"You can have them with pleasure," replies she, smiling kindly at him.

"Don't stay too long in the night air, Dulce," says Roger, with the utmost unconcern, turning to go indoors again. This is the unkindest cut of all. If he had gone away angry, silent, revengeful, she might perhaps have forgiven him, but

this careful remembrance of her, this calm and utterly indifferent concern for her comfort fills her with vehement anger.

The blood forsakes her lips, and her eyes grow bright with passionate tears.

"Why do you take things so much to heart?" says Stephen, in a low voice. "Do you care so greatly then about an unpleasant speech from him? I should have thought you might have grown accustomed to his *brusquerie* by this."

"He wasn't brusque just now," says Dulce. "He was very kind, was he not? Careful about my catching cold, and that."

"*Very*," says Gower, significantly. "Yet there are tears in your eyes. What a baby you are."

"No, I am not," says Dulce, mournfully. "A baby is an adorable thing, and I am very far from being that.'

"If babies are to be measured by their adorableness, I should say you are the very biggest baby I ever saw," declares Mr. Gower, with such an amount of settled conviction in his tone that Dulce, in spite of the mortification that is still rankling in her breast, laughs aloud. Delighted with his success, Gower laughs, too, and taking her hand draws it within his arm.

"Come, do not let us forget Roger gave you to me for this dance," he says. "If only for that act of grace, I forgive him all his misdeeds." With a last lingering glance at the beauty of the night, together they return to the ballroom.

CHAPTER XV.

"I would that I were low laid in my grave."
KING JOHN.

"Proteus, I love thee in my heart of hearts."
TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA.

THE last guest has departed. Portia has wished "goodnight" to a very sleepy Dulce, and has gone upstairs to her own room. In the corridor where she sleeps, Fabian sleeps too, and as she passes his door lightly and on tip-toe, she finds that his door is half open, and, hesitating, wonders, with a quick pang at her heart, why this should be the case.

Summoning courage she advances softly over his tl.reshold, and then sees that the bed within is unoccupied, that to-night, at least, its master is unknown to it.

A shade darkens her face; stepping back on to the corridor she thinks deeply for a moment, and then, laying her candle on a bracket near, she goes noiselessly down the stairs again, across the silent halls, and, opening the hall door, steps out into the coming dawn.

Over the gravel, over the grass, through the quiet pleasaunce she goes unswervingly, past the dark green laurels into the flower garden, and close to the murmuring streamlet to where a little patch of moss-grown sward can be seen, surrounded by aged elms.

Here she finds him!

He is asleep! He is lying on his back, with his arms behind his tired head, and his beautiful face uplifted to the heavens. Upon his long dark lashes lie signs of bitter tears.

Who shall tell what thoughts had been his before kind sleep fell upon his lids and drove him into soothing slumber

> "The sweetest joy, the wildest woe, is love;
> The taint of earth, tho odor of the skies
> Is in it."

So sings Bailey. More of wild woe than joy must have been in Fabian's heart before oblivion came to him. Was he thinking of her—of Portia? For many days his heart has been "darkened by her shadow," and to-night—when all his world was abroad, and he alone was excluded from prostrating himself at her shrine—terrible despair had come to lodge with him, and grief, and passionate protest.

Stooping over him, Portia gazes on him long and earnestly, and then, as no dew lies upon the grass, she sits down beside him, and taking her knees into her embrace, stays there silent but close to him, her eyes fixed upon the "patient stars," that are at last growing pale with thought of the coming morn.

The whole scene is full of fantastic beauty—the dawning day; the man lying full length upon the soft green moss in an attitude suggestive of death; the girl, calm, passionless, clad in her white clinging gown, with her arms crossed, and her pale, upturned face beautiful as the dawn itself.

The light is breaking through the skies; the stars are dying out one by one. On the crest of the hill, and through

the giant firs, soft beams are coming; and young Apollo, leaping into life, sends out a crimson ray from the far East.

Below, the ocean is at rest—wrapt in sullen sleep. "The singing of the soft blue waves is hushed, or heard no more." And no sound comes to disturb the unearthly solemnity of the hour. Only a little breeze comes from the south, soft and gentle, and full of tenderest love that is as the

"Kiss of morn, waking the lands."

He stirs! His eyes open. He turns restlessly, and then a waking dream is his. But is it a dream? He is looking into Portia's eyes, and she—she does not turn from him, but in a calm, curious fashion returns his gaze, as one might to whom hope and passion are as things forgotten.

No word escapes him. He does not even change his position, but lies, looking up at her in silent wonder. Presently he lifts his hand, and slowly covers it with one of hers lying on the grass near his head.

She does not draw it away—everything seems forgotten—there is only for her at this moment the pale dawn, and the sweet calm, and the solitude and the love so fraught with pain that overfills her soul!

He draws her hand nearer to him—still nearer—until her bare soft arm (chilled by the early day) is lying upon his lips. There he lets it rest, as though he would fain drink into his thirsty heart all the tender sweetness of it.

And *yet* she says nothing, only sits silent there beside him, her other arm resting on her knees, and her eyes fixed immovably on his.

Oh! the rapture and the agony of the moment—a rapture that will never come again, an agony that must be theirs for ever.

"My life! my love!" he murmurs at last, the words passing his lips as if they were one faint sigh, but yet not so faint but she may hear them.

She sighs, too; and a smile, fine and delicate, parts her lips, and into her eyes comes a strange fond gleam, born of passion and nearness and the sweetness of loving and living.

The day is deepening. More rosy grows the sky, more fragrant the early breeze. Her love is at her feet, her arm upon his lips; and on the fair naked arm his breath is coming and going quickly, unevenly—the feel of it makes glad her very soul!

Then comes the struggle. Oh! the sweetness, the perfectness of life if spent alone with the beloved. To sacrifice all things—to go away to some far distant spot with *him*—to know each opening hour will be their very own: they two, with all the world forgotten and well lost—what bliss could equal it?

Her arm trembles in his embrace; almost she turns to give herself into his keeping for ever, when a sound, breaking the great stillness, changes the face of all things.

Was it a twig snapping, or the rush of the brooklet beyond? or the clear first notes of an awakening bird? She never knows. But all at once remembrance returns to her, and knowledge and wisdom is with her again.

To live with a stained life, however dear; to feel his shame day by day; to distrust a later action because of a former one; to draw miserable and degrading conclusions from a sin gone by. *No!*

Her lips quiver. Her heart dies within her. She turns her eyes to to the fast reddening sky, and, with her gaze thus fixed on heaven, registers an oath.

"As she may not marry him whom she loves, never will she be wife to living man!"

And this is her comfort and her curse, that in her heart, until her dying day will nestle her sullied love. Hidden away and wept over in secret, and lamented bitterly at times, but dearer far, for all that, than anything the earth can offer.

Gently—very gently—without looking at him, she draws her arm from his touch and rises to her feet. He, too, rises, and stands before her silently as one might who awaits his doom.

"To hear with eyes belongs to Love's rare wit." *He* seems to know all that is now passing in her soul, her weakness—her longing—her love—her strength—her oath—her grief; it is all laid bare to him.

And she herself; she is standing before him, her rich satin gown trailing on the green grass, her face pale, her eyes large and mournful. Her soft white neck gleams like snow in the growing light; upon it the strings of pearls rise and fall tumultuously. How strange—how white she seems—like a vision from fairy, or dreamland. Shall he ever forget it?

Laying his hand upon her shoulders, he looks steadily into her eyes; and then, after a long pause—

"There should be proof," he says, sadly.

And she says,

"Yes, there should be proof," in a tone from which all feeling, and hope, and happiness have fled.

And yet the world grows brighter. The early morn springs forth and glads the air.

> "But, nor Orient morn,
> Nor fragrant zephyr, nor Arabian climes,
> Nor gilded ceilings, can relieve the soul
> Pining in thraldom."

A long pause follows her sentence, that to him has savored of death. Then he speaks:

"Let me raise your gown," he says, with heart-broken gentleness, "the dew of morning is on the grass."

He lifts her train as he says this, and lays it across the bare and lovely arm that had been his for some blessed minutes. As he sees it, and remembers everything—all that *might* have been, and all that *has* been, and all that *is*—a dry sob chokes his voice and, stooping, he presses his lips passionately to her smooth, cool flesh.

At this she bursts into bitter weeping; and, letting her glimmering white gown fall once again in its straight, cold folds around her, gives way to uncontrollable sorrow.

"Must there be grief for you, too, my own sweetheart?" says Fabian; and then he lays his arms around her and draws her to him, and holds her close to his heart until her sobs die away through pure exhaustion. But he never bends his head to hers, or seeks to press his lips to those—that are sweet and dear beyond expression—but that never can be his. Even at this supreme moment he strives to spare her a passing pang.

"Were she to kiss me now," he tells himself, "out of the depths of her heart, when the cold, passionless morning came to her she would regret it," and so he refrains from the embrace he would have sold his best to gain.

"I wish there might be death, *soon*," says Portia, and then she looks upon the awakening land so full of beauty, and growing light, and promise of all good.

The great sun, climbing up aloft, strikes upon her gaze, and the swaying trees, and the music of all things that live comes to her ears, and with them all comes, too, a terrible sense of desolation that overwhelms her.

"How can the world be so fair?" she says. "How can it smile, and grow, and brighten into life, when there is no life—for—"

She breaks down.

"For us?" he finishes for her, slowly; and there is great joy in the blending of her name with his. "Yes, I know; it is what you would have said. Forgive me, my best beloved; but I am glad in the thought that we grieve together."

His tone is full of sadness; a sadness without hope. They are standing hand in hand, and are looking into each other's eyes.

"It is for the last time," she says, in a broken voice.

And he says:

"Yes, for the very last time."

He never tries to combat her resolution—to slay the foe that is desolating his life and hers. He submits to cruel fate without a murmur.

"Put your face to mine," she says, *so* faintly that he can hardly hear her; and then once more he holds her in his arms, and presses her against his heart.

How long she lies there neither of them ever knows; but presently, with a sigh, she comes back to the sad present, and lifts her head, and looks mournfully upon the quiet earth.

And even as she looks the day breaks at last with a rush, and the red sunshine, coming up from the unknown, floods all the world with beauty.

CHAPTER XVI.

"The quarrel is a very pretty quarrel as it stands."
THE RIVALS.

IT is two days later. Everyone you know is in the drawing-room at the Court—that is, everyone except Dulce. But presently the door opens, and that stormy young person enters, with her sleeves tucked up and a huge apron over her pretty cashmere gown, that simply envelops her in its folds.

"I am going to make *jam*," she says, unmistakable pride in her tone. She is looking hopelessly conceited, and is plainly bent on posing as one of the most remarkable housekeepers on record—as really, perhaps, she is.

"Jam?" says Mr. Browne, growing animated. "What kind of jam?"

"Plum jam."

"You don't say so?" says Mr. Browne, with unaffected interest. "Where are you going to make it?"

"In the kitchen, of course. Did you think I was going to make it *here*, you silly boy?" She is giving herself airs now, and is treating Dicky to some gentle badinage."

"Are the plums in the kitchen?" asked he, regardless of her new-born dignity, which is very superior, indeed.

"I hope so," she says, calmly.

"Then I'll go and make the jam with you," declares Mr. Browne, genially.

"Are you really going to make it?" asks Julia, opening her eyes to their widest. "Really? Who told you how to do it?"

"Oh, I have known all about it for years," said Dulce, airily.

Every one is getting interested now—even Roger looks up from his book. His quarrel with Dulce on the night of her ball has been tacitly put aside by both, and though it still smoulders and is likely at any moment to burst again into a flame, is carefully pushed out of sight for the present.

"Does it take *long* to make jam?" asks Sir Mark, putting in his query before Stephen Gower, who is also present, can say anything.

"Well—it quite depends," says Dulce, vaguely. She conveys to the astonished listeners the idea that though it might take some unfortunately ignorant people many days to produce a decent pot of jam, *she*—experienced as she is in all culinary matters—can manage it in such a short time as it is not worth talking about.

Everybody at this is plainly impressed.

"Cook is *such* a bad hand at plum jam," goes on Miss Blount, with increasing affectation, that sits funnily on her, "and Uncle Christopher does so love mine. Don't you, Uncle Christopher?"

"It is the best jam in the world," says Uncle Christopher,

promptly, and without a blush. "But I hope you won't spoil your pretty white fingers making it for me."

"Oh, no, I shan't," says Dulce, shaking her head sweetly. "Cook does all the nasty part of it; she is good enough at that."

"I wonder what the nice part of it is?" says Roger, thoughtfully.

"There is no nice part; it is all work—*hard* work, from beginning to end," returns his *fiancée*, severely.

"I shan't eat any more of it if it gives you such awful trouble," says Dicky Browne, gallantly but insincerely; whereupon Roger turns upon him a glance warm with disgust.

"Dulce," says the Boodie, who is also in the room, going up to Miss Blount, whom she adores, and clasping her arms round her waist; "let *me* go and see you make it; *do*," coaxingly. "I want to get some when it is *hot*. Mamma's jam is always cold. Darling love of a Dulce, take me with you and I'll help you to *peel* them."

"Let us all go in a body and see how it is done," says Sir Mark, brilliantly. A proposal received with acclamations by the others, and accepted by Dulce as a special compliment to herself.

They all rise (except Sir Christopher) and move towards the hall. Here they meet Fabian coming towards them from the library. Seeing the cavalcade, he stops short to regard them with very pardonable astonishment.

"Where on earth are you all going?" he asks; "and why are Dulce's arms bare at this ungodly hour? Are you going in for housepainting, Dulce, or for murder?"

"Jam," says Miss. Blount proudly.

"You give me relief. I breathe again," says Fabian.

"Come with us," says Dulce, fondly.

He hesitates. Involuntarily his eyes seek Portia's. Hers are on the ground. But even as he looks (as though compelled to meet his earnest gaze) she raises her head, and turns a sad, little glance upon him.

"Lead, and I follow," he says to Dulce, and once more they all sweep on towards the lower regions.

"After all, you know," says Dulce, suddenly stopping short on the last step of the kitchen stairs to harangue the politely dressed mob that follows at her heels, "it might,

pernaps, be as well if I went on first and prepared cook for your coming. She is not exactly impossible you see, but to confess the truth she can be at times difficult."

"What would she do to us?" asks Dicky, curiously.

"Oh! nothing, of course; but," with an apologetic gesture, "she might object to so many people taking possession of her kingdom without warning. Wait one moment while I go and tell her about you. You can follow me in a minute or two."

They wait. They wait a long time, Stephen Gower, with watch in hand, at last declares that not one or two, but quite five minutes have dragged out their weary length.

"Don't be impatient; we'll see her again some time or other," says Roger, sardonically, whereupon Mr. Gower does his best to wither him with a scornful stare.

"Let us look up the cook," says Sir Mark, at which they all brighten up again and stream triumphantly towards the kitchen. As they reach the door a sensation akin to nervousness makes them all move more slowly, and consequently with so little noise that Dulce does not hear their approach. She is so standing, too, that she cannot see them, and as she is talking with much spirit and condescension they all stop again to hear what she is saying.

She has evidently made it straight with cook, as that formidable old party is standing at her right hand with her arms akimbo, and on her face a fat and genial smile. She has, furthermore, been so amiable as to envelop Dulce in a *second* apron; one out of her own wardrobe, an article of the very hugest dimensions, in which Dulce's slender figure is utterly and completely lost. It comes up in a little square upon her bosom and makes her look like a delicious over-grown baby, with her sleeves tucked up and her bare arms gleaming like snow-flakes.

Opposite to her is the footman, and very near her the upper housemaid. Dulce being in her most moral mood, has seized this opportunity to reform the manners of the household.

"You are most satisfactory, you know, Jennings," she is saying in her soft voice that is trying so hard to be mistress-like, but is only sweet. "Most so! Sir Christopher and I both think that, but I do wish you would try to quarrel just a *little* less with Jane."

At this Jane looks meekly delighted while the footman

turns purple and slips his weight uneasily from one leg to the other.

"It isn't all my fault, ma'am," he says at length, in an aggrieved tone.

"No, I can quite believe that," says his mistress, kindly. "I regret to say I have noticed several signs of ill temper about Jane of late."

Here Jane looks crestfallen, and the footman triumphant.

"I wish you would *both* try to improve," goes on Dulce, in a tone meant to be still dignified, but which might almost be termed entreating. "*Do* try. You will find it so much pleasanter in the long run."

Both culprits, though silent, show unmistakable signs of giving in.

"If you only knew how unhappy these endless dissensions make me, I am sure you *would* try," says Miss Blount, earnestly, which, of course, ends all things. The maid begins to weep copiously behind the daintiest of aprons; while the footman mutters, huskily:

"Then I *will* try, ma'am," with unlooked-for force.

"Oh, *thank* you," says Dulce, with pretty gratitude, under cover of which the two belligerents make their escape.

"Well done," says Sir Mark at this moment; "really, Dulce, I didn't believe it was in you. Such dignity, such fervor, such tact, such pathos! We are all very nearly in tears. I would almost promise not to blow up Jane myself, if you asked me like that."

"What a shame!" exclaims Dulce, starting and growing crimson, as she becomes aware they have all been listening to her little lecture. "I call it right down *mean* to go listening to people behind their backs. It is horrid! And you, too, Portia! So shabby!"

"Now who is scolding," says Portia; "and after your charming sermon, too, to Jennings, all about the evil effects of losing one's temper."

"If you only knew how unhappy it makes us," says Dicky Browne, mimicking Dulce's own manner of a moment since so exactly that they all laugh aloud; and Dulce, forgetting her chagrin, laughs, too, even more heartily than they do.

"You shan't have one bit of my jam," she says, threatening Dicky with a huge silver spoon; "see if you do! After all, cook," turning to that portly matron, "I think I'm tired

to-day. Suppose you make this jam; and I can make some more some other time."

As she says this, she unfastens both the aprons and flings them far from her, and pulls down her sleeves over her pretty white arms, to Gower's everlasting regret, who cannot take his eyes off them, and to whom they are a "joy forever."

"Come, let us go up-stairs again," says Dulce to her assembled friends, who have all suddenly grown very grave.

In silence they follow her, until once more the hall is gained and the kitchen forgotten. Then Dicky Browne gives way to speech.

"I am now quite convinced," he says, slowly, "that to watch the making of plum jam is the most enthralling sport in the world. It was so kind of you, dear Dulce, to ask us to go down to see it. I don't know *when* I have enjoyed myself so much."

"We have been disgracefully taken in," says Julia, warmly.

"And she didn't even offer us a single plum!" says Mr. Browne, tearfully.

"You shall have some presently, with your tea," says Dulce, remorsefully. "Let us go and sit upon the verandah, and say what we thought of our dance. No one has said anything about it yet."

Though late in September, it is still "one of those heavenly days that cannot die." The sun is warm in the heavens, though gradually sinking, poor tired god, toward his hard-earned rest. There are many softly-colored clouds on the sky.

Tea is brought to them presently, and plums for Dicky; and then they are all, for the most part, happy.

"Well, I think it was a deadly-lively sort of an evening," says Mr. Browne, candidly, *apropos* of the ball. "Every one seemed cross, I think, and out of sorts. For my own part, there were moments when I suffered great mental anguish."

"Well, I don't know," says Sir Mark, "for my part, I enjoyed myself rather above the average. Good music, good supper—the champagne I must congratulate you about, Dulce—and very pretty women. What more could even a Sybarite like Dicky desire? Mrs. George Mainwaring was there, and I got on capitally with her. I like a woman who prefers sitting it out, *some* times."

"I don't think I even saw Mrs. George," says Dulce. "Was she here?"

"You couldn't see her," says Roger; "she spent her entire evening in the rose-colored ante-room with Gore."

"What a shameless tarradiddle," says Sir Mark.

"What did she wear?" asks Julia.

"I can't remember. I think, however, she was all black and blue."

"Good gracious!" says Dicky Browne, "has George Mainwaring been at it again? Poor soul, it *is* hard on her. I thought the last kicking he had from her brother would have lasted him longer than a month."

"Nonsense, Dicky," says Dulce; "I hear they are getting on wonderfully well together now."

"I'm glad to hear it," says Dicky, in a tone totally unconvinced.

"I don't think she is at all respectable," says Mrs. Beaufort, severely; "she—she—her dress was *very* odd, I thought—"

"There might, perhaps, have been a little more of it," says Dicky Browne. "I mean, it was such a pretty gown, that we should have been glad to be able to admire another yard or two of it. But perhaps that terrible George won't give it to her; and perhaps she liked herself as she was. '*Nuda veritas*.' After all, there is nothing like it. 'Honesty is the best policy,' and all that sort of thing—eh?"

"Dicky," says Sir Mark, austerely, "go away! We have had quite enough of you."

"How did you all like the McPherson's?" Dulce asks, hurriedly.

"Now, there was one thing," says Dicky, who is not to be repressed, "how could any fellow enjoy himself in the room with the McPhersons? That eldest girl clings on to one like ivy—and precious tough old ivy too. She clung to me until I was fain to sit down upon the ground and shed salt and bitter tears. I wish she had stayed amongst her gillies, and her Highland flings, and those nasty men who only wear breeks, instead of coming down here to inflict herself upon a quiet, easy-going county."

"Why didn't you get her another partner, if you were tired of her?"

"I couldn't. I appealed to many friends, but they all de-

serted me in my hour of need. They wouldn't look at her. She was 'single in the field, yon solitary Highland lass.' She wasn't in the swim at all; she would have been as well—I mean, much better—at home."

"Poor girl," says Portia.

"She isn't poor, she's awfully rich," says Roger. "They are all rich. They positively look at the world through a golden veil."

"They'd want it," says Dicky, with unrelenting acrimony; "I christened 'em the Heirs and Graces—the boys are so rich, and the girls think themselves so heavenly sweet. It is quite my own joke, I assure you. Nobody helped me." Here he laughs gaily, with a charming appreciation of his own wit.

"Did she dance well?" asks Stephen, waking up suddenly from a lengthened examination of the unconscious Dulce's fair features. An examination, however, overseen by Roger, and bitterly resented by him.

"She didn't dance at all, she only galumphed," says Dicky, wrathfully. "She regularly took the curl out of me; I was never so fatigued in my life. And she is so keen about it, too; she will dance, and keeps on saying, 'Isn't it a pity to lose this lovely music?'—and so on. I wished myself in the silent grave many times."

"Well, as bad as she is, I'd make an even bet she will be married before her sister," says Stephen.

"I don't think either of them will be married before the other," says Mr. Browne, gloomily; "one might go much farther than them without faring worse. I laughed aloud when at last I got rid of the elder one; I gave way to appropriate quotation; I fell back on my Wordsworth; I said:

> 'Nor am I loth, but pleased at heart,
> Sweet (?) Highland girl, from thee to part.'"

The query represents the expression of Mr. Browne's face as he mentions the word that goes before it.

"Well done, Dicky!" says Sir Mark.

"What has Dicky been saying now?" asks Fabian, who has been wandering in a very sad dreamland, and just come back to a sadder earth at this moment. "Has he been excelling himself?"

"I'll say it all over again for you, if you like," says Dicky, kindly; "but for nobody else."

"Thanks, but later on," says Fabian, smiling.

He is sitting near Portia, but not very near. Now Dicky, filled with a desire to converse with Miss Vibart, gets off his seat and flings himself on a rug at her feet. Sir Mark, who is always kindly, though a trifle cynical at times, and thoughtful towards those he likes, is displeased at this change that Dicky has made. Fabian he likes—nay, if there be one friend in the world he *loves*, it is Fabian Blount. Portia, too, is a favorite of his, so great a favorite that he would gladly see her throw some sunshine into Fabian's life. To make these two come together, and by Portia's influence to induce Fabian to fling away from him and to conquer the terrible depression that has desolated his life ever since the fatal affair of the forged check, has become one of Sir Mark's dearest dreams.

Now it seems to him that when Fabian has so far overcome his settled determination to avoid society as to find a seat beside Portia, and to keep it for at least an hour, it is a vile thing in the thoughtless Dicky to intrude his person where so plainly it is not wanted.

Making some idle excuse, he brings the reluctant Dicky to his side.

"Can't you keep away from them?" says Sir Mark, in an angry whisper.

"Away from whom?" asks Dicky, resentfully.

"From them," with a gentle motion of the hand in the direction of Portia and Fabian.

"What on earth for?" says Dicky Browne, still more resentfully.

"Don't you see he *likes* her?" says Sir Mark, meaningly.

"I suppose he does," says Dicky Browne, obtusely. "I like her too. We all like her."

"Of course, my dear fellow, one can quite understand that she is about as likeable a person as I know; but—er—don't you see—he wants to be *alone* with her."

"I don't doubt him," says Dicky Browne. "So should I, if I got the chance."

Sir Mark shrugs his shoulders; there isn't much to be got out of Dicky.

"That goes without telling," he says; "you are always prowling around after her, for no reason that I can see. But you haven't grasped my idea, he—he's *in love* with her, and *you* aren't, I suppose?"

"I don't see why you should suppose anything of the kind," says Dicky, bitterly aggrieved because of the word "prowling." I can be as much in love with her as another, can't I, if I like? In fact," valiantly, 'I think I *am* in love with her."

"Oh, you be hanged!" says Sir Mark, forcibly, if vulgarly, turning away from him in high disgust.

"Well, you needn't cut up so rough about nothing," says Dicky, following him. "He has had his chance of being alone with her, now, hasn't he? and see the result."

And when Sir Mark turns his eyes in the direction where Portia sits, lo! he finds Fabian gone, and Miss Vibart sitting silent and motionless as a statue, and as pale and cold as one, with a look of fixed determination in her beautiful eyes, that yet hardly hides the touch of anguish that lies beneath.

Meantime Dulce and Roger are sparring covertly, but decidedly, while Julia, who never sees anything, is fostering the dispute by unmeant, but most ill-judging remarks. Stephen Gower has gone away from them to have a cigarette in the shrubberies.

Sir Mark and Dicky Browne are carrying on an argument, that in all human probability will last their time.

"I can't bear Mrs. Mildmay," says Dulce, *apropos* of nothing. Mrs. Mildmay is the Rector's wife, and a great friend of Roger's.

"But why?" says Julia, "she is a nice little woman enough, isn't she?"

"Is she? I don't know. To me she is utterly distasteful; such a voice, and such—"

"She is at least gentle and well-mannered," interrupts Roger, unpleasantly.

"Well, yes, there is a great deal in that," says Julia, which innocent remark incenses Dulce to the last degree, as it gives her the impression that Julia is taking Roger's part against her.

"I daresay she is an angel," she says, fractiously; "but I am not sufficiently heavenly-minded myself to admire her inanities. Do you know," looking broadly at Roger, "there are some people one hates without exactly knowing why? It is, I suppose, a Doctor Fell sort of dislike, 'the reason why I cannot tell,' and all that sort of thing."

"I don't believe you can, indeed," says Roger, indignantly,

"Don't you?" says Dulce.

"My dear Roger, if you eat any more sugar, you will ruin your teeth," says Julia. Roger, who has the sugar bowl near him, and is helping himself from it generously, laughs a little. Julia is a person who. if you wore a smoking cap even once in your life, would tell you it would make you bald; or if you went out without a veil, you would have freckles for the rest of your life—and so on.

"*Don't* eat any more," says Julia, imploringly; "you can't like that nasty white stuff."

"Oh! doesn't he?" says Dulce, sarcastically. "He'd eat anything sweet. It isn't three days ago since he stole all my chocolate creams, and ate them every one."

"I did not," says Roger.

"Yes, he did," declares Dulce, ignoring Roger, and addressing herself solely to Julia. "He did, indeed, and *denied* it afterwards, which just shows what he is capable of."

"I repeat that I did not," says Roger, indignantly. "I found them certainly in your room up-stairs—your sitting-room—but I gave them to the Boodie."

"Oh! *say* so," says Miss Blount, ironically.

"Chocolate creams!" says the small Boodie, emerging from an obscure and unexpected corner. "What about them? Where are they? Have you any, mamma?"

"*You* ought to know where they are," says Dare, flushing; "you ate them."

"When?" asks the Boodie, in a searching tone.

"Yes, indeed, *when?*" repeats Dulce, unpleasantly.

"You remember the day Roger gave you some, don't you, darling?" says the darling's mamma, with the kindly intention of soothing matters.

"No, I don't," says the uncompromising Boodie, her blue eyes wide, and her red lips apart.

"Do you mean to tell me I didn't give you a whole box full the day before yesterday?" exclaims Mr. Dare, wrathfully, going up to the stolid child, and looking as if he would like to shake her.

"Day before yesterday?" murmurs the Boodie, with a glance so far from the present moment that it might be in Kamtschatka.

"Yes, exactly, *the day before yesterday!*" says Roger, furiously.

"How could I remember about that?" says the Boodie, most nonchalantly.

"Oh, don't scold the poor child," says Dulce, mildly, "she won't like it; and I am sure she is not in fault. Go away, Boodie, Roger doesn't like being shown up."

"Shown up! Upon my *life* I gave her those vile bonbons," says Mr. Dare, distractedly, "If I wanted them couldn't I buy them? Do you suppose I go round the world stealing chocolate creams?"

At this, poor Julia getting frightened, and considering the case hopeless, rises from her seat and beats a most undignified retreat. This leaves the combatants virtually alone.

"There is hardly anything you wouldn't do in my opinion," says Dulce, scornfully.

A pause. Then:

"What a temper you have!" exclaims Roger, with the most open contempt.

"Not so bad as yours, at all events. Your face is as white as death from badly suppressed rage."

"It is a pity you can't see your own," says Roger slowly.

"Don't speak to me like that, Roger," says Dulce, quickly, her eyes flashing; "and—and say at once," imperiously, "that you know perfectly well I have the temper of an angel, in comparison with yours."

"Would you have me tell a deliberate lie?" says Roger, coldly.

This brings matters to a climax. Silence follows, that lasts for a full minute (a long time in such a case), and then Dulce speaks again. Her voice is quite changed; out of it all passion and excitement have been carefully withdrawn.

"I think it is time this most mistaken engagement of ours should come to an end," she says, quite quietly.

"That is as you wish, of course," replies he. "But fully understand me; if you break with me now, it shall be at once and forever."

"Your manner is almost a threat," she says. "It will be difficult to you, no doubt, but *please* do try to believe it will be a very great joy to me to part from you 'at once and forever.'"

"Then nothing more remains to be said; only this: it will

be better for you that Uncle Christopher should be told I was the one to end this engagement, not—"

"Why?" impatiently.

"On account of the will, of course. If you will say I have refused to marry you, the property will go to you."

"That you have *refused* me!" says Miss Blount, with extreme indignation. "Certainly, I shall never say that—never! You can say with truth I have refused to marry you, but nothing else."

"It is utter insanity," says Roger, gravely. "For the sake of a ridiculous whim, you are voluntarily resigning a great deal of money."

"I would resign the mines of Golconda rather than do that. I would far rather starve than give you the satisfaction of saying you had given me up!"

As she has a very considerable fortune of her own that nothing can interfere with, she finds it naturally the very simplest thing in the world to talk lightly about starvation.

"What should I say that for?" asks Roger, rather haughtily.

"How can I tell? I only know you are longing to say it," returns she, wilfully.

"You are too silly to argue with," protests he, turning away with a shrug.

Running down the steps of the balcony, Dulce, with her wrath still burning hotly within her, goes along the garden path and so past the small bridge, and the river, and the mighty beeches that are swaying to and fro.

Turning a corner, she comes suddenly upon Gower, who is still smoking cigarettes, and no doubt day-dreaming about her.

"You have escaped from everybody," he says to her, in some surprise, Dulce being a person very little given to solitude or her own society undiluted.

"It appears I have not," returns she, bitterly.

"Well, I shan't trouble you long; I can take myself off in no time," he says, good-humoredly, drawing to one side to let her pass.

"No—no; you can stay with me if you care to," she says, wearily, ashamed of her petulance.

"*Care!*" he says, reproachfully; and then, coming nearer to her, "you are unhappy! Something has happened!" he says, quickly, "what is it?"

"Nothing unhappy," says Dulce, in a clear, soft voice; "certainly not that. Something very different; something, indeed, I have been longing and hoping for, for weeks, for months, nay, all my life, I think."

"And—" says Stephen.

"I have broken off my engagement with Roger."

A great, happy gleam awakes within his dark eyes. Instinctively he takes a step nearer to her, then checks himself, and draws his breath quickly.

"Are you sure?" he says, in a carefully calm tone, "are you *sure* you have done wisely?—I mean, will this be for your own *good?*"

"Yes, yes, of course," with fretful impatience. "It was my own doing, I wished it."

"How did it all come about?" asks he, gently.

"I don't know. He has an abominable temper, as you know; and I—well, I have an abominable temper, too," she says, with a very wintry little smile, that seems made up of angry, but remorseful tears. "And—"

"If you are going to say hard things of yourself I shall not listen," interrupts Gower, tenderly; "you and Roger have quarreled, but perhaps, when time makes you see things in a new light, you will forgive, and—"

"No, never! I am sure of that. This quarrel is for—'*now and forever?*'"

She repeats these last four words mechanically—words that bear but the commonest meaning to him, but are linked in her mind with associations full of bitterness.

"And you have no regrets?" regarding her keenly.

"None."

"And does no faintest spark of love for him rest in your heart? Oh, Dulce, take care!"

"Love! I never loved," she says, turning her large eyes full on his. "I have seen people who loved, and so I know. *They* seem to live, think, breathe for each other alone; the very air seemed full of ecstasy to them; every hour of their day was a divine joy; but I—what have I known of all that?"

She pauses and lays her hand upon her heart.

"And he?" asks Gower, unwisely.

She laughs ironically.

"You have seen him," she says. "Not only that, but you

have surely seen us together often enough to be able to answer your question for yourself. A very rude question, by-the-by."

"I beg your pardon," says Gower, heartily ashamed of himself.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," says Dulce, throwing out one hand in a quick, nervous fashion. "Nothing matters much, does it? And now that we are on it, I will answer your question. I believe if I were the only woman in the world, Roger would never have even liked me! He seemed *glad, thankful*, when I gave him a release; *almost*," steadily, "as glad as I was to give it!"

"*Were* you glad!" asks Gower, eagerly. Going up to her, he takes her hand and holds it with unconscious force in both his own.

"Am I to think that you doubt me?" she says with a frown.

"Shall I ever have occasion to doubt you?" says Gower, with sudden passion. "Dulce! now that you are free, will you listen to me? I have only one thought in the world, and that is you, always you! Have I any chance with you? My darling, my own, be kind to me and try to take me to your heart.

The tears well into her eyes. She does not turn from him, but there is no joy in her face at this honest outburst, only trouble and perplexity, and a memory that stings. There is, too, some very keen gratitude.

"*You* at least do not hate me," she says, with a faint, sobbing cadence in her voice, that desolates, but sweetens it. Her lips quiver. In very truth she is thankful to him in a measure. Her heart warms to him. There is to her a comfort in the thought (a comfort she would have shrunk from acknowledging even to herself) in the certainty that he would be only too proud, too pleased, to be to her what another might have tried to be but would not. Here is this man before her, willing at a word from her to prostrate himself at her feet, while Roger—

"Hate you!" says Gower, with intense feeling. "Whatever joy or sorrow comes of this hour, I shall always know that I really *lived* in the days when I knew you. My heart, and soul and life, are all yours to do with as you will. I am completely at your mercy."

"Do not talk to me like that," says Dulce, faintly.

"Darling, let me speak now, once for all. I am not perhaps just what you would wish me, but *try* to like me, will you?"

He is so humble in his wooing that he would have touched the hearts of most women. Dulce grows very pale, and moves a step away from him. A half-frightened expression comes into her eyes, and shrinking still farther away, she releases her hand from his grasp.

"You are angry with me," says Stephen, anxiously, trying bravely not to betray the grief and pain her manner has caused him; "but hear me. I will be your true lover till my life's end; your will shall be my law. It will be my dearest privilege to be at your feet forever. Let me be your slave, your servant, *anything*, but at least yours. I love you! Say you will marry me some time."

"Oh, no—*no*—NO!" cries she, softly, but vehemently, covering her eyes with her hands.

"You shall not say that," exclaims he passionately; "why should I not win my way with you as well as another, now that you say that you are heart whole. Let me plead my cause?" Here he hesitates, and then plays his last card. "You tell me you have discarded Roger," he says, slowly; "when you did so (forgive me), did he appeal against your decision?"

"No," says Dulce, in a tone so low that he can scarcely hear her.

"Forgive me once more," he says, "if I say that he never appreciated you. And you—where is your pride? Will you not show him now that what he treated with coldness another is only too glad to give all he has for in exchange? Think of this, Dulce. If you wished it I would die for you."

"I almost think I do wish it," says Dulce, with a faint little laugh; but there is a kindness in her voice new to it, and just once she lifts her eyes and looks at him shyly, but sweetly.

Profiting by this gleam of sunshine, Gower takes possession of her hand again and draws her gently towards him.

"You *will* marry me," he says, "when you think of everything." There is a meaning in his tone she cannot fail to understand.

"Would you," she says tremulously, "marry a woman who does not care for you?"

"When you are once my wife I will teach you to care for me. Such love as mine must create a return.

"You think that now; you feel sure of it. But suppose you failed! No drawing back. It is too dangerous an experiment."

"I defy the danger. I will not believe that it exists; and even if it did—still I should have you."

"Yes, that is just it," she says, wearily. "But how would it be with me? I should have you, too, but—" Her pause is full of eloquence.

"Try to trust me," he says, in a rather disheartened tone. He is feeling suddenly cast down and dispirited, in spite of his determination to be cool and brave, and to win her against all odds.

To this she says nothing, and silence falls upon them. Her eyes are on the ground; her face is grave and thoughtful. Watching her with deepest anxiety, he tells himself that perhaps after all he may still be victor—that his fears a moment since were groundless. Is she not content to be with him? Her face—how sweet, how calm it is! She is thinking, it may be, of him, of what he has said, of his great and lasting love for her, of—

"I wonder whom Roger will marry now," she says, dreamily, breaking in cruelly upon his fond reverie, and dashing to pieces by this speech all the pretty Spanish castles he has been building in mid-air.

"Can you think of nothing but him?" he says, bitterly, with a quick frown.

"Why should I not think of him?" says Dulce, quite as bitterly. "Is it not natural? An hour ago I looked upon him as my future husband; now he is less to me than nothing! A sudden transition, is it not, from one character to another? *Then* a possible husband, *now* a stranger! It is surely something to let one's mind dwell upon."

"Well, let us discuss him, then," exclaims he, savagely. "You speak of his marrying. Perhaps he will bestow his priceless charms on Portia."

"Oh, no!" hastily; "Portia is quite unsuited to him."

"Julia, then?"

"Certainly not *Julia*," disdainfully.

"Miss Vernon, then? She has position and money and so-called beauty."

"Maud Vernon! what an absurd idea; he would be wretched with her."

"Then," with a last remnant of patience, "let us say Lilian Langdale."

"A fast, horsey, unladylike girl like that! How could you imagine Roger would even *look* at her! Nonsense!"

"It seems to me," says Stephen, with extreme acrimony, "that no one in this county is good enough for Roger; even you, it appears, fell short."

"I did not," indignantly. "It was I, of my own free will, who gave him up."

"Prove that to him by accepting *me*."

"You think he wants proof?" She is facing him now, and her eyes are flashing in the growing twilight.

"I do," says Stephen, defiantly. "For months he has treated you with all the airs of a proprietor, and you have submitted to it. All the world could see it. He will believe you *sorry* by-and-by for what has now happened; and if he should marry before you, what will they all say—what will you feel? What—"

She is now as pale as death. She lifts her hand and lays it impulsively against his lips, as though to prevent his further speech. She is trembling a little (from anger, she tells herself), and her breath is coming quickly and unevenly, so she stands for a moment collecting herself, with her fingers pressed against his lips, and then the agitation dies, and a strange coldness takes its place.

"You are sure you love me?" she asks, at length, in a hard, clear voice, so unlike her usual soft tones, that it startles even herself.

"My beloved, can't you see it?" he says, with deep emotion.

"Very well, then, I will marry you some day. And—and to-morrow—it must be *to-morrow*—you will let Roger know I am engaged to you? You quite understand?"

He does, though he will not acknowledge it even to himself.

"Dulce, my own soul!" he says, brokenly; and, kneeling on the grass at her feet, he lifts both her hands and presses them passionately to his lips.

They are so cold and lifeless that they chill him to his very heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Too early seen unknown, and known too late!"
ROMEO AND JULIET.

"There's neither honesty, manhood, nor good fellowship in thee."
HENRY IV.

IT is next day. There has been rain in the night—*heavy* rain—and the earth looks soaked and brown and desolate. Great storms, too, had arisen, and scattered the unoffending leaves far and wide, until all the paths are strewn with rustling types of death. Just now the drops are falling, too—not so angrily as at the midnight past, but persistently, and with a miserable obstinacy that defies all hope of sunshine. "The windy night" has made "a rainy morrow," and sorrowful, indeed, is the face of Nature.

Sorrowful, too, is the household. A lack of geniality pervades it from garret to basement; no one seems quite to know what is the matter, but "*suspect*" that "crow that flies in Heaven's sweetest air" stalks rampant up stairs and down, and damps the ardor of everyone.

Dulce had waked early, had risen from her bed, and—with the curious feeling full upon her of one who breaks her slumber *knowingly* that some grief had happened to her over night, the remembrance of which eludes her in a tantalizing fashion—had thrown wide her window, and gazed with troubled eyes upon the dawning world.

Then knowledge came to her, and the thought that she had made a new contract that must influence all her life, and with this knowledge a sinking of the heart, but no drawing back and no repentance. She dressed herself; she knelt down and said her prayers, but peace did not come to her, or rest or comfort of any sort, only an unholy feeling of revenge, and an angry satisfaction that should not have found a home in her gentle breast.

She dressed herself with great care. Her prettiest morning gown she donned, and going into the garden plucked a last Maréchal Niel rose and placed it against her soft cheek, that was tinted as delicate as itself.

And then came breakfast. And with a defiant air, but with some inward shrinking she took her place behind the urn, and prepared to pour out tea for the man who yesterday was her affianced husband, but who for the future must be less than nothing to her.

But as fate ordains it she is not called upon to administer bohea to Roger this morning. Mr. Dare does not put in appearance, and breakfast is got through—without, indeed, an outbreak of any sort, but in a dismal fashion that bespeaks breakers ahead, and suggests hidden but terrible possibilities in the future.

Dulce is decidedly cross; a sense of depression is weighing her down, a miserable state of melancholy that renders her unjust in her estimate of all those around her. She tells herself she hates Roger; and then again that she hates Stephen, too; and then the poor child's eyes fill with tears born of a heartache and difficult of repression; to analyze them she knows instinctively would be madness, so she blinks them bravely back again to their native land, and having so got rid of them, gives herself up to impotent and foolish rage, and rails inwardly against the world and things generally.

Even to Portia she is impatient, and Julia she has annihilated twice. The latter has been lamenting all the morning over a milliner's bill that in length and heaviness has far exceeded her anticipations.

But this is nothing; Julia is always so lamenting, and indeed, I never yet saw the milliner's bill, however honest, that wasn't considered a downright swindle, and three times as exorbitant as it ought to be!

"Now look at this, my dear Dulce," says the unobservant Julia, holding out a strip of paper about half a yard in length to Miss Blount, who has been ominously silent for the past hour. "I assure you the trimmings on that dress *never* came to that. They were meagre to the last degree; just a little *suspicion* of lace, and a touch of velvet here and there. It is absurd—it is a fraud. Did *your* trimmings ever come to that?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," says Dulce, impatiently; "I never keep any accounts of my own money. I make a *point* of not doing that. If it's spent, it's spent, you know, and one gains nothing by thinking of it. It only shows one how extravagant one has been, and I do so *hate* scolding myself!"

"But, my dear child, Madame Grande *must* have made a mistake. It is all nonsense; if you would just look it over, if only to convince yourself. I am not unreasonable."

"I won't look it over," says Miss Blount, promptly. "I *hate* looking over things, and I hate bills, and I hate Madame Grande, and I hate—everything."

After this outburst she makes for the door, and the morning-room knows her no more for a considerable time. Portia looks up from her painting in some surprise, and Julia tries to smother the thought that the final expression of hatred should have ended in the word "*you*."

In the hall outside, Dulce almost runs into Stephen's arms, who has come up to see her very early, being in a restless and most unsatisfactory mood. His eyes brighten and he flushes warmly as he meets her, but she, drawing back from him, gives him to understand by the very faintest of imperative gestures that he is to come no nearer.

"You!" she says, ungraciously.

"Yes—you expected me?" This question suggests the possibility that he fears he is not altogether welcome. She waives it, and goes on as though she had not heard him.

"Have you done what you promised?" she asks, coldly.

"No, you mean—?" he hesitates.

"You *must* remember. You were to tell Roger next day; *this* (though it hardly sounds right) is next day; *have* you told him that I have promised to marry you some time?"

There is not the faintest nervousness or girlish confusion in her tone. Stephen, watching her closely, feels a terrible despair that threatens to overwhelm him. If only one little blush would mantle her cheek, if for one second her beautiful, feverishly bright eyes would droop before his! He battles with the growing misery, and for the time being, allays it.

"Not yet;" he says. Then he colors hotly, and his eyes leaving her face seek the ground. A sense of shame betrays itself in every feature. "It is early yet," he says, in a strange reluctant tone; "and if—if you think it better to put it off for a day or two, or even to let him find out for himself by degrees—or—"

"No!"—remorselessly—"he shall be told *now—at once!* Remember all you said about him last evening. *I* have not forgotten. What!" cries she, with sudden passion, "do you think I will live another day believing he imagines me re-

gretful of my decision—cut to the heart, perhaps, that I am no longer anything to him? I tell you no! The very thought is intolerable."

"But—"

"There must be no hesitation," she says, interrupting him with a quick gesture. "It was in our agreement that he should be told to-day. If one part of that agreement is to be broken, why then, let us break it all; it is not too late yet. *I* shall not care, and perhaps it will be better if—"

Her cruelty stings him into vehement declaration.

"It will *not* be better," he says, wrathfully. "I will do anything, everything, you wish, except"—bitterly—"give you up."

To him it seems a wretched certainty that it *is* her wish *already* to break the bond formed between them but a few short hours ago. Has she so soon repented?

"Where is Roger?" he asks, turning from her, all the lover's gladness gone from his eyes. He is looking stern and pale, and as a man might who is determined to do that against which his soul revolts.

How shall he tell this man, who was once his dearest friend, that he has behaved as a very traitor to him.

"In the stables, no doubt," replies she, scornfully. The change in his manner has not touched her; nay, he tells himself it has not so much as been noticed by her.

Moving abruptly away, he goes down the hall and out of the open door, and down the stone steps across the gleaming sunshine, and so is lost to sight.

Dulce watches him until the portico outside hides him from view, and then, walking very slowly and with bent head, she goes in the direction of Fabian's room. She is so absorbed in her own reflections that she hardly hears approaching footsteps, until they are quite close to her. Looking up, with a quick start, she finds herself face to face with Roger.

The surprise is so sudden that she has not time to change color until she has passed him. Involuntarily she moves more quickly, as though to escape him, but he follows her, and standing right before her, compels her to stop and confront him

"One moment," he says. His tone is haughty, but his eyes are more searching than unkind. "You meant what

you said last evening?" he asks, quickly, and there is a ring in his voice that tells her he will be glad if she can answer him in the negative. Hearing it, she grows even paler, and shrinks back from him.

"Have I given you any reason to doubt it?" she says, coldly.

"No—certainly not." His tone has grown even haughtier. "I wish, however, to let you know I regret anything uncivil I may have said to you on—that is—at our last interview."

"It is too late for regrets." She says this so low that he can scarcely hear her.

"You are bent, then, upon putting an end to everything between us?"

"Yes." At this moment it seems impossible to her to answer him in anything but a monosyllable. Her obstinacy angers him.

"Perhaps you are equally bent," he says, sneeringly, "upon marrying Gower?"

I suppose he has expected an indignant denial to this question, because, when silence follows it, he starts, and placing both his hands upon her shoulders, draws her deliberately over to a side window, and stares into her downcast face.

"Speak," he says roughly. "*Are* you going to marry him?"

"Yes."

The word comes with difficulty from between her pale, dry lips.

"He has asked you?"

"He has."

"You were engaged to him even *before* you broke off your engagement with me?"

"Oh, *no*, NO!"

"Since when, then? Was it last evening he spoke to you?"

"Yes."

"After you had parted from me? Sharp work, upon my life."

He laughs—a short, unmirthful laugh—and taking his hands from her shoulders, moves back from her, yet always with his eyes on her face.

"You should be glad," she says, slowly.

"No doubt. So he was your confidant—your father-confessor, was he? All my misdemeanors were laid bare to him. And then came pity for one linked to such an unsympathetic soul as mine, and then naturally came what pity is akin to! It is a pretty story. And for its hero 'mine own familiar friend.'" He laughs again.

She makes a movement as though to leave him, but he stops her.

"No, do not go yet," he says. "Let me congratulate you. *Le roi est mort, vive le roi.* My successor, it seems, was not difficult to find; and—By-the-by, why are you alone now? Why is not your *new* lover by your side?"

"My *first* lover—*not* my new lover," she says, bitterly, speaking now with some spirit.

"I didn't count, I suppose."

"*You*— !" She draws her breath quickly, and, then, having subdued the indignation that had almost overcome her, goes on quietly: "you never loved me. There was never a moment in all my knowledge of you when I could have flattered myself with the thought that I was more to you than a cousin."

"He is very different, I suppose?" He flushes a dark crimson as he puts this question.

"Altogether—*utterly!* At least, I can tell myself, I am to him something more than a necessary evil, a thing forced upon him by circumstances. To *you* I was only that, and *worse.* There were moments when I believe you *hated* me."

"We need not discuss that now," says Dare coldly. "Where is Gower?"

"I don't know; at least, I am not sure. What do you want with him? There is no use in quarreling with him," she says, nervously.

"Why should I quarrel with any man because a woman chooses to prefer him to me? That is her affair altogether."

He walks away from her, and she, moving into the deep embrasure of the large bow window, stands staring blankly upon the sunlit landscape without.

But presently he returns and, standing beside her, gazes out, too, upon the flowers that are bowing and simpering as the light wind dances over them.

"I am going away this evening," he says, at length, very gently. "It is uncertain when I shall return. Good-by."

He holds out his hand, awkwardly enough, and even when, after a momentary hesitation, she lays hers in it, hardly presses it. Yet still, though he has paid his adieux, he lingers there, and loiters aimlessly, as if he finds a difficulty in putting an end to the miserable *tete-a-tete*.

"You were wrong just now," he says, somewhat abruptly, not looking at her; "there was never one second in my life when I *hated* you; you need not have said *that*."

"Where are you going?" asks she, brokenly.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. But before I go, I want to say to you—that—that—if ever you *want* me, even if I should be at the end of the world, *send* for me, and I will come to you."

Are there tears in his eyes? He drops her hand, and turning hastily away, goes down the corridor, and is beyond recall before she can muster courage to say anything to him kind or forgiving.

Going into the yard to order the dog-cart to take him to the station to catch the up-train, he encounters Stephen Gower (who, by-the-by, had gone to encounter him), on his knees before a kennel, fondling a two-months old setter pup.

This pup is a baby belonging to one of Roger's favorite setters, and is, therefore, a special pet of his.

"Put that dog down," he says, insolently.

"Why?" says Stephen, just as insolently.

"Because petting is bad for young things, and because *I* wish it."

"Oh, nonsense!" says Stephen, rather cavalierly, continuing his attention to the dog.

"Look here," says Dare, furiously, "it has nothing to do with the dog, you will understand—*nothing*—but I want to tell you now what I think of you, you low, mean, contemptible—"

Gower literally gasps for breath. Letting go the dog, he rises to his feet, and coming close to Roger, says, passionately,

"What do you mean by that?"

"Have you not been making love to my cousin behind my back? Deny that if you can!"

"I won't deny that I love her, certainly."

"Will you deny anything else? That you have acted as few men would have done. Without honor—without—"

This of course puts an end to even enforced civility; Mr. Gower instantly and most naturally strikes out with the most exemplary vigor, and presently these two most mistaken young men are clasped in an embrace, warm indeed, but hardly so loving as one might desire.

How things might have ended, whether with death or only with bloody noses, no one now can tell, because Sir Mark Gore, coming on the scene just at this awful moment, seizes Roger by the shoulder and by sheer force of arm and will, forces him back from his adversary.

"What do you two boys mean by this burst of insanity?" he says, angrily. "Such an example to the young fellows in the yard; you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Roger." This is plainly meant for two stable boys in the distance, who, with open mouths, are staring at the combatants, and have been plainly enjoying themselves to the utmost.

"Well, I'm not," says Roger, doggedly, who is still thirsting for blood. "If shame should attach itself to any one, it should be to that fellow there," pointing contemptuously to Gower.

"Well, I forbid any more of this," says Sir Mark. "Stop it at once. It is all about that child indoors, I suppose; I never heard of—"

"At all events, I have told him what I think of him," says Roger, panting. "Low, underhand sneak."

"What?" says Stephen, fiercely, making a step forward.

"I insist on knowing what it is all about," says Sir Mark, authoritatively. "Of course, one understands a disgraceful scene like this *always* means a woman, but *is* it Dulce?"

"To come here under the guise of friendship and deliberately make love to the girl to whom he *knew* I was engaged; was there ever such treachery since the world began?" says Roger. "Would any fellow, with any claim to the word gentleman, do that? Now, I leave it to you, Gore?"

"My dear fellow, you must remember it is apparent to everybody that *you* don't want her," says Sir Mark, taking Stephen's part, though in his soul he is on Roger's side. "Would you act the part of the dog in the manger? You don't affect her yourself, yet nobody else must look at her. She has found out, I *suppose*, that she prefers some one else

to you. Women, as a rule, will choose for themselves, and who shall blame them! When, later on, you choose for yourself too, you will be very grateful to her and Stephen for this hour. Just now self-love is disagreeing with you. If I were you I should clear out of this for a bit."

"Oh? as for *that*, I'm going," says Roger; "but I'm glad I have had a chance of speaking to him before I go; he undermined me, and poisoned her mind with regard to me from first to last. I wasn't *quite* blind, though I said nothing. He spoke evilly of me behind my back, I have no doubt, and maligned me most falsely when there was a chance; a more blackguardly transaction—"

"You shall answer to me for this," says Gower, in a white rage; "you have lied in your statement from beginning to end."

"No one shall answer for anything," says Sir Mark, promptly; "I won't hear of it. Are you both gentlemen! and to dream of dragging a woman's name into a scandalous quarrel of this kind? For shame! Take my advice, Roger, and go abroad, or to the—or anywhere you like for a month or two, and see what that will do for you. You know you are only trying to make a grievance out of nothing; you never *really* cared for her, as a man should for his wife." Sir Mark's eyes sadden as he says this, and an irrepressible sigh escapes him; is he thinking of the time when he could have cared for a woman with all his heart and soul?

"No, of course not; you and she and all are quite agreed about *that*," says Roger, bitterly.

"My good boy, all your world knows it," says Sir Mark, persistently.

"My world is wiser than even *I* gave it credit for," says Roger, sneeringly. But there is a sob in his voice as he turns away that sends a pang through Sir Mark's heart. What has happened? Have they all been mistaken, then? Even have the principal actors in this small drama been blind until now, when the awakening has come too late.

Without another word to Stephen, Sir Mark goes slowly indoors, and, passing through the hall, meets Portia coming toward him, a troubled expression in her large sad eyes.

"What is it, Mark?" she says, laying her hand on his arm. "Something has happened to Dulce; she is lying on her bed, and will not speak to me or any one. Has she really quarreled finally with Roger?"

"Oh, it is worse than that," says Gore, with something that is almost a groan.

"It can't be true that she has thrown him over for Mr. Gower?" says Portia, recoiling.

"One never knows what a woman will do," says Mark, gloomily, "I think she has."

"But what is it all about? How did it begin?"

"With a chocolate cream," says Sir Mark, sententiously. "I assure you, my dear Portia, for the sake of a paltry box of bonbons she has sacrificed the entire happiness of her life!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"The firste vertue, sone, if thou wilt lerne,
Is to restreine, and kepen wel thy tonge."
THE MANCIPLE'S TALE—CHAUCER.

THE days have grown shorter and shorter. Daylight now is to be prized, not sported with, as in the gay and happy Summer. "The inaudible and noiseless foot of Time" has carried us from "Golden September" to bleakest Winter, and into that month which claims Christmas for its own.

At the hall, everything is very much the same as it was when last we saw it, if we except the fact that Roger is absent. He is abroad; *so* much abroad, indeed, that nobody knows where he is. A week after his departure he had written to Sir Christopher, and the week after that again to Mark Gore; but, beyond these two meagre attempts at correspondence, no news has been heard of him. Whether, as Mr. Browne has elegantly expressed it, "he is up the Nile, or up the Spout," is a matter of speculation.

Sir Christopher is looking a little older, a little graver. He is not so testy as of yore, a change that fills Dulce's heart with misgivings. That he has fretted greatly over her broken engagement with Roger (who is to the old Baronet as dear as his own son should have been, and second only to Fabian in his affections) she well knows; she well knows, too, how magnanimously—to please her—he has tried to be civil to Stephen Gower, and to welcome him with cordiality as his future nephew. But the effort to do all this has aged and saddened him; and from time to time his mind wanders

restlessly to the young man who left his home full of anger and indignant grief.

As for Stephen, living in his "Fool's Paradise, he drinks delight," nor heeds how false is all the happiness that seems to surround him. Bitter is the fruit he feeds on, though he will not acknowledge it even to himself; and, looking on his dainty lady-love, he is still happy, and content to bear all things, and suffer all things, for the few grains of adulterated sweetness doled out by her every now and then with a niggard hand. He will see no cloud on his horizon, although it sits there heavily; nor will he notice aught but what is good and lovable in this girl, upon whom he has centred all his dearest hopes.

"For the rest, there has been but little change amongst them. Julia Beaufort and the children had gone away for a month, but returned to the Hall a fortnight ago, and are now—that is, the children, at all events—anxiously awaiting Christmas Day with all its affectations of gaiety and good-will, and its hideous puddings.

Sir Mark did pretty much the same as Julia. He went away, too, and came back again, thus filling up the measure of his days. Mr. Browne had declined to stir for any pretense whatever, and has been enjoying himself to the utmost, now at Portia's feet, now at Dulce's, and, when all things fail, at Julia's.

Perhaps to Fabian the days have seemed longest. He is silent, cold, self-contained as ever; but now there is something else, a settled melancholy, that yet has in it a mixture of extreme pride, that forbids any approach to it; a melancholy born of despair, and the knowledge that there is laid upon him "a burden greater than he can bear."

"Time, the subtle thief of youth," is stealing from him his best years; his life is going, and with it all chance of joy and gladness. Ever since that memorable evening in the garden, after the ball, a strange reserve has arisen between him and Portia. That morning, as the soft pink dawn came up from behind the hills—when passion, pale but triumphant, had held full sway—has never been forgiven by either. A sense of terror has possessed Portia ever since—the knowledge of a danger barely overcome; and with him there has been the memory of pain, and terrible self-restraint that has scathed him as it passed him by. And withal a settled cold-

ness has fallen upon them, the greater because of the weakness that had characterised the hour of which I write.

He does not condemn her, but in his heart he does not forgive her want of faith, her almost openly avowed distrust. Of his own will he never lets his eyes rest upon the fair beauty of her face, and turns aside when unlucky chance has flung him in her path.

And she—a contempt for her own want of self-control, together with the miserable knowledge that her heart is irrevocably his, has rendered her almost repellent in her manner toward him. When he is near, her eyelids droop, her lips take a harder curve, she is dumb, silent, unsympathetic; and yet when he is gone, when the door has closed behind him, the fever of her blood runs high, and but for social training, she would gladly rise, and, in spite of all things, call to him and implore him to return to her side once more.

To a casual observer, of course, all this is not apparent; but to these two, between whom Fate sits relentless, the pain and sorrow of it is deep and cruel. More deep, more sorrowful for him, of course. His whole life is a ruin; he had thought of many things when first the blight fell upon him; but that he should fall in love, and because of this curse that has blasted his best days, should be compelled to turn aside from the love of his heart, had not occurred to him. His life has grown too bitter to be borne with fortitude, almost he is "half in love with easeful death." Oh, the joy—the rapture! to pass away from all the tortures of this "work-a-day world" to a land unknown, but surely full of rest. To die—to disappear! To court a glad forgetfulness! In this alone lies hope, and, that sweetest of all sweet things, indifference.

Not coward enough to compel death, he still longs for it; he would slip away from all and sink into oblivion, and gladly deem himself and his sad history forgotten. "To cease upon the midnight with no pain?" What sweeter, kinder fate could visit him than that for which Keates longed—not vainly.

Into his life, too, some smaller worries are thrown. The old man Slyme, the secretary, has been going rapidly from bad to worse, of late. His intemperate habits are growing on him, and now seldom comes the day when he is not discovered to be unfit for duty of any kind.

Naturally such conduct incenses Sir Christopher to the last degree. The old man has been for years in his service, but

time wears out all things, and even regard and use can be forgotten. Fabian, falling into the breach, seeks to mend it, although Slyme has never been a favorite of his, and although he is fully aware that he is very distasteful to the secretary for reasons unknown; still he pleads his cause, principally because the man is old and friendless; and this, too, he does secretly, the secretary being ignorant of the force brought to bear upon his delinquencies, a force that keeps a roof over his head, and leaves him a competence without which the world would be a barren spot to him indeed, with only the poor-house—that most degrading of all places—to which to turn.

To-day is melancholy, cold and bleak. The winds are sighing; the earth is bare and naked; no vestige of a fresh and coming life can yet be seen. Upon the gray sands, far away, the white waves dash themselves tumultuously, the sea birds shriek, and, "blasting keen and loud, roll the white surges to the sounding shore."

Indoors there is warmth and comfort. Julia, sitting over the fire, finding she cannot get Dulce to gossip with—Dulce, indeed, is not come-at-able of late—turns gratefully to Portia, who happens to come into the room at this moment.

"The fire is the only delicious thing in the house," she says, fretfully. "*Do* come here and enjoy it with me."

"Anything the matter with you?" asks Portia, gently, seating herself on a low lounging chair at her side.

"Oh! nothing, nothing. But Dulce is very strange of late, is she not? Ever since Roger's going, don't you think? And all that affair was quite absurd, according to my lights. Stephen won't suit her half as well. Fancy any woman throwing over the man she likes, for a mere chimera. Wrecking her entire happiness for the sake of a chocolate cream!"

"It sounds absurd," says Portia; "but I cannot believe such a paltry thing as that has separated them. There must have been something else."

"Well, perhaps so. Sir Christopher, one can see, is very distressed about it. He is unfortunate about them all, is he not? poor old man. Fabian's affair was so wretched, so unlooked for, too," says Julia, in the comfortably gossiping tone one knows so well, drawing her chair a little nearer to the fire. "I can't think what could have tempted him to do it."

Portia turns abruptly toward her.

"Do you, too, question his innocence?" she says, her breath coming quickly.

"Well—er—you see one doesn't like to talk about it," says Mrs. Beaufort with a faint yawn. "It seems pleasanter to look upon him as a suffering angel, but there are some who don't believe in him you know. Do come closer to the fire, Portia, and let us have a good chat."

"Go on," says Portia, "you were talking of Fabian, you were saying—"

"Yes, just so. Was I uncharitable? It doesn't make him a bit the worse in my eyes, you know, not a bit. It is all done and over years ago, and why remember nasty things. Really, do you know, Portia—it may be horrid of me—but really I think the whole story only makes him a degree more interesting."

Portia shivers, and ignores this suggestion.

"Do other people doubt him, too?" she asks in a strangely cold tone. Though she may disbelieve in him herself, yet it is agony to her that others should do the same.

"My dear, yes, of course; a great many; in fact, pretty nearly everybody but just those you see here—Sir Mark excepted, I think, and then Dicky Browne. But Dicky hasn't enough brains to believe or disbelieve in anybody."

"Ah!" says Portia. She leans back in her chair, and holds up a fan between her and the fire and Julia. She can hardly analyze her own thoughts; but, even at this moment, when all her finest feelings are ajar, she tells herself that surely—surely she cordially detests Julia Beaufort. She tells herself, too, that she loves Mark Gore.

"You see, in your doubt of him, you are not a solitary exception," says Julia, with elephantine playfulness. "Others think with you. It is the plainest case in the world, I think. I don't blame you."

"How do you know I *do* doubt him?" asks Portia, suddenly, turning her large eyes upon her, that are glittering in the firelight. At this Julia recoils a little and looks somewhat uncomfortable.

"Your voice, your manner, led me to believe so," she says, slowly, and with hesitation. "If you don't, of course it is so much to your credit."

"You mean—" asks Portia.

"Well, his whole bearing would preclude the thought of

dishonor of any kind," says Julia, boldly, and with the utmost effrontery, considering all she had said a moment since. "Suspicion could hardly rest with such a man as Fabian. Of course, the whole thing is a wretched mistake, that will be cleared up sooner or later, let us hope sooner, as surely he has suffered enough already, poor dear fellow!"

She pauses; Portia puzzled, and secretly indignant, says nothing. Seeing she will not speak, Julia goes on again even more impressively than before.

"I never entertained a shadow of a doubt with regard to him," she says, nobly, "never! Who could? I was always one of his very warmest supporters."

This is too much! Portia murmuring something civil, but distinct, rises abruptly, and, going to the door, opens it, and is soon beyond call, and beyond hearing of the voice that has grown hateful to her.

Just at this moment, Julia's absurd shufflings, and equivocations, and barefaced changes from one asseveration to another fill her with wrath. She is distressed, and at war with her own heart; and so, crossing the hall, makes for the one room that is especially dear to all woman when in trouble, namely, her own bedroom.

But passing by Dulce's door, and finding it open, she pauses before it, and finally, after some hesitation, she crosses the threshold only to find it empty.

The fire is burning brightly; a little crushed glove lies upon the hearth-rug, showing how its owner but lately had knelt before the fire, or stood near it to gaze into its depths, and call up fancied faces from its coals.

A little low chair attracts her attention; sinking into it, she lets her chin fall into the palm of her hands, and presently is lost in painful and half-angry reflection.

"Pretty nearly everybody." The words ring in her ears; does the whole county, then, look upon Fabian with averted eyes? And perhaps—who knows—the very people beneath the roof may distrust him, too; she had not known until this evening Julia's private opinion; the others may agree with her, but naturally shrink from saying so. Roger, perhaps, believed him guilty; and Dicky Browne, it may be, in his secret soul, regards him with contempt, and Sir Mark—

No, *not* Sir Mark! She could not mistake him. However foolish it may be, certainly his belief in Fabian is genu-

me. And somehow of late, she has grown rather fond of Sir Mark; and here she sighs, and laying her hand upon her heart, presses it convulsively against it as though to still the pain that has sprung into life there, because of the agitation that has been hers for the past half hour.

Dulce, coming up-stairs, presently, finds her still sitting over the fire, in an attitude that betokens the very deepest dejection.

"You here, *très chère*, and alone," she says, gaily, stooping over her in caressing fashion. "Naughty girl. You should have told me you were going to honor me with your presence, and I would have made my room gay to receive you."

"I don't want you to make a stranger of me. I like your room as it is," says Portia, with a smile.

"Well, don't sit crouching over the fire; it will spoil your complexion; come over to the window and see what the storm has done, and how lovely nature can look even when robed in Winter's garb."

Portia, rising, follows her to the window, but as she reaches it she sinks again wearily into a lounging chair, with all the air of one whose limbs refuse obstinately to support her.

As both girls gaze out upon the chilly landscape, white here and there with the snow that fell last night, Fabian, coming from between the dark green branches of an ancient lauristinus, with two red setters at his heels, and a gun upon his shoulder, passes beneath the window, going in the direction of the home wood.

Leaning forward, Dulce taps lightly on the pane, and Fabian, hearing the quick sound, stops short, and lifts his eyes to the window. As he sees his pretty sister, he nods to her, and a bright smile creeps round his lips, rendering his always handsome face actually beautiful for the moment.

Only for a moment; his gaze wandering, instinctively, falls on Portia, standing pale and calm beside her cousin. Their eyes meet, and, as if by magic, the smile dies, his lips grow straight and cold again, and, without another glance, he whistles to his dogs, and, turning the corner, is rapidly out of sight.

"Dear Fabian—poor darling," says Dulce, tenderly, who has noticed only the kindly smile vouchsafed to her. "How sad he always looks. Even his smile is more mournful than

the tears of others. What a terrible pressure Fate has laid upon him. He——; how pale you are, Portia! What is it, dearest? I am sure you are not well to-day."

"I am quite well. I am only cold; go on," speaking with some difficulty; "you were saying something about—Fabian."

"I *think* so much of him that it is a relief to talk sometimes; but I won't make you doleful. Come over to the fire if you are cold."

"No, I like being here; and—do go on, I like listening to you."

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything very particular, you know. It has all been said so often. *So* often, and to no use. What a little thing, Portia, gives rise to the most terrible consequences; the mere fact that two people wrote alike, and formed their capitals in the same fashion, has been the utter ruin of a man's life. It sounds dreadful—cruel! sometimes—*often*—I lie awake thinking of it all, and wondering can nothing be done, and no hope ever comes to me. That is the saddest part of it, it will go on like this forever, he will go to his grave," mournfully, "and his very memory will be associated with disgrace."

She pauses and sighs heavily, and folds her fingers tightly together. Not Stephen, nor Roger, but this dishonored brother, is the love of her life—as yet.

"Of course you heard a good deal about it in town," she says, sadly. "He had many friends there at one time. Fair-weather friends! They, as a rule, are cruellest when evil comes; and they never remember. You heard him often discussed?"

This is a downright question to which Portia is constrained to give an answer.

"Yes; often," she says, sorely against her will.

"Aunt Maud would enlarge upon it, of course," says Dulce, bitterly. "She likes whisperings and slanderous tongues. And you, when first you heard it, what did you think?"

Portia shrinks from her. Must she answer this question, too?

"Think?" she says, evasively.

"Yes; what did you think of Fabian?"

"Very little," says Portia, who has grown quite white;

"why should I think at all? I did not know him then. It was most natural, was it not? He was a stranger to me."

"A stranger, yes. But still your cousin—your own blood. I should have thought much, I think. It was natural, I dare-say, but even *then*—you must recollect—did you believe in him? Did you guess the truth?"

"I don't think I quite understand," said Portia, faintly.

Dulce, in a vague fashion, takes note of her confusion.

"Not understand! But it is such a simple matter," she says, in a changed tone. She looks puzzled, surprised, and a distressed look comes into her eyes. "I mean even *then*, did you believe him innocent?"

"How can I remember?" says Portia, drawing her breath quickly.

The distrust grows upon Dulce's tell-tale face. She comes a step nearer to her cousin.

"No," she says, slowly—her eyes are fixed attentively upon Portia—"it is some time ago. But you can at least tell me *this*. Now—*now*—that you know him—when you have been beneath the same roof with him for some months, how is it with you? You *feel* that he is innocent?"

There is a terrible amount of almost agonized earnestness in her tone.

"How you catechise one," says Portia, with a painfully bald attempt at indifference that does not impose upon the slowly awakening suspicions of the other for one instant. "Let us change the subject."

"In one moment. I want an answer to my question first. Now that you have seen and known Fabian, do you believe him innocent?"

A most fatal silence follows. Had the question referred to any one else—had even any one else asked the question, she might have evaded it successfully, or even condescended to an actual misstatement of her real thoughts on the subject rather than give pain or be guilty of a social error. She would, in all probability, have smiled and said, "Yes, oh! yes; one must see that he is incapable of such an act," and so on. But just now she seems tongue-tied, unable to say one word to allay her companion's fears. A strange sense of oppression that weighs upon her breast grows heavier and more insupportable at each moment, and Dulce's great

gleaming eyes of blackest gray are reading her very soul, and scorching her with their reproachful fire.

"Speak," she cries at last, in a vehement tone, laying her hand on Portia's arm, and holding her with unconscious force. "Say—say," with a miserable attempt at entreaty, and a cruel sob, "that you do not believe him guilty of this cursed thing."

Portia's lips are so dry and parched that they absolutely refuse to give utterance to any words. In vain she tries to conquer the deadness that is overpowering her, but without avail. She lifts her eyes beseechingly, and then grows literally afraid of the girl leaning over her, so intense and bitter is the hatred and scorn that mar the beauty of her usually fair, childish face.

This upward, nervous glance, breaks the spell of silence, and gives voice to Dulce's wrath. It does more, it betrays to her the truth—the bitter fact—that in Portia's eyes her brother—her beloved—is neither more nor less than a successful criminal.

"No, do not trouble yourself to answer me," she says, in cold, cutting tones. "I want no lies, no pretty speeches. I thank you, at least, that you have spared me those. In your soul—I can see—you think him guilty of this shameful deed. Oh! it is horrible!" She covers her face with both her hands, and sways a little, as one might, who is, indeed, hurt to death. "And you, too," she says, faintly; "the only one of all our *friends*. And I so trusted you. I so *loved* you!"

"Dulce!" cries poor Portia, in an agonized tone. "Hear me!" She springs to her feet, but Dulce, removing her hands from her face, holds them both towards her in such a repellant manner, that she dares not approach. In the last half hour, this girl, so pliant, so prone to laughter and childish petulance, has sprung from the happy insolence of youth into the sad gravity of womanhood.

"What a fool I was," she says, in a low concentrated tone. "I watched all, and I was so *sure*. I thought—the idea will make you laugh, no doubt—but I thought that you *loved* him. Yet why should you laugh," she says with a sudden passion of remembrance. "Many women have loved him, the best, the loveliest—nay, all the world loved him, till this false blight fell upon him. And even since—"

She hesitates. It may be emotion, it may be recollection

and a thought that *he* may not wish further disclosures, check her.

"Yes, and even since?" echoes Portia, bending eagerly forward. Some feeling even greater than the anguish of the moment compels her to ask the question. But it is never answered. Dulce, with quivering lips and flashing eyes, follows out her own train of thought.

"I congratulate you upon your complete success as a coquette," she says. "No doubt, a London season can develop talents of that sort. You at least deserve praise as an apt pupil. Step by step, day by day, you led him on to his destruction—nay, I am not blind—until at last he laid his whole heart at your feet; you made him adore you only to—"

"Dulce—Dulce," cries Portia, throwing out her arms in passionate protest. "It is not true, I—"

"I *will* speak," says Dulce, pressing her back from her, I *will* tell you what I think of you. Scorning him in your heart you still encouraged him, until his very soul was your own. Do you think I can't see how it is? Have you forgotten he is my own flesh and blood, and that I can read him as no one else can? He thinks you sweet and noble, and perfect, no doubt. Alas! how he has been deceived!"

"Listen to me."

"No, I will not listen. I have trusted you too far already. Oh!" piteously, "you who have seen him, and have noticed the beauty, the sweetness of his life, how could you have misjudged him? But," with vehement anger, "your narrow mind could not appreciate his! You lack generosity. You could not grasp the fact that there might be in this wide world such a thing as undiscovered wrong. You condemned without a hearing. Why," growing calmer, "there have been *hundreds* of cases where the innocent have suffered for the guilty."

"I know it," says Portia, feverishly, taking Dulce's hand and trying to draw her towards her; but the girl recoils.

"Do not touch me," she says. "There is no longer any friendship between us."

"Oh! Dulce, do not say that," entreats Portia, painfully.

"I will say it. All is at an end as far as love between us is concerned. Fabian is part of me. I cannot separate myself from him. His friends are mine. His detractors are

mine also. I will not forgive them. I believe him a saint, you believe him defiled, and tainted with the crime of *forgery*."

She draws her breath quickly; and Portia turns even whiter than before.

"Whereas I protest to you," goes on Dulce, rapidly losing all constraint, and letting her only half-suppressed passion have full sway. "I believe you to be less pure than him, less noble, less self-denying; *he* would be slow to believe evil of anyone. And this one thing I am resolved on. He shall no longer be left in ignorance of your scorn; he shall not any more spend his affection npon one who regards him with disdain; he shall know the truth before the day dies."

"Have you no pity?" says Portia, faintly.

"Have you none? You condemned him willingly."

"Oh! not willingly!"

"I don't care, you *have* condemned him."

"If you will only think, you will see—"

"Don't speak to me, I *hate* you," says Miss Blount, growing undignified because of her deep grief and agitation. "And don't think you can turn me from my purpose. I shall tell him what you think of him before this evening passes, be sure of that."

"There is no need to tell him," says Portia, in so low a tone that Dulce can scarcely hear her. "He—he knows already!"

"What!" cries Dulce, aghast. But her rout only lasts for a moment. "I don't care," she says, recklessly, "that is only another reason why I should warn him to beware of you!"

Then, as though some cruel thought strikes her, she suddenly bursts into tears.

"Were there not *others?*" she sobs, bitterly. "If a slave was indispensable to your happiness, was there not Roger, or Stephen, or Dicky Browne, or even Sir Mark, that you must needs claim *him?* He was heart-whole when you came; if not happy, he had at least conquered the first awful pain; could there be greater wickedness than to add another grief to his life? He had suffered as no man ever yet suffered, and yet you came to add another pang, and to destroy him, body and soul! When I think of it all, and the deliberate cruelty of it," cries she, with a gesture of uncontrollable passion, "if I could lay you dead at my feet this moment by a word I would do it!"

"I wish you could do it," says Portia, quite calmly. The terrible grief of the poor child before her is almost more than she can bear. Her calmness that is born of despair, brings Dulce back to something that resembles quietude.

"I shall go now," she says; "you have had enough of me, no doubt; but remember I shall tell Fabian all that has passed. I warn you of this, honestly."

She moves towards the door. There is a moment's hesitation, and then Portia intercepts her, and placing her back against the door to bar egress, she says, in slow, determined tones:

"You shall tell him nothing. You shall not leave this room until you promise to keep secret all that has passed here. Do you understand?—you are to tell him *nothing*."

"Oh! yes, I shall," says Miss Blount, contemptuously, knowing herself much the stronger of the two. "And even sooner than I first intended. I shall go to meet him on his return from the wood, and tell him then."

She turns back; and, crossing the room again, goes towards another door; that opening discloses a large closet beyond, in which many dresses and other articles of feminine attire are hanging, like so many Blue Beard's wives. A little window, lattice-paned, illumines this tiny chamber.

Portia following her, lays her hand upon her arm. She has changed her tone completely, from command to entreaty.

"*Do* not speak to Fabian of this," she says. "Do not let him think we two have discussed the wretched subject."

"I shall tell him precisely what has happened," says Dulce, unsoftened. "That you think him nothing less than a common *felon*."

"Oh! do not put it into language," says Portia, sharp pain in her voice; she puts up her hands as she speaks, as though to ward off a blow. "And I implore you, as you *love* him, to let things rest as they are."

"And so to give you scope to practise your wiles without hindrance," says Dulce, with a short, unlovely laugh. "No, I shall try my very utmost to lower you in his esteem, and so kill his fatal infatuation for you."

"You will fail," says Portia, hopelessly. "You will only succeed in hurting him."

"How sure you are of your power," says Dulce, angrily. "Yet I will not be disheartened. I will save him if I can."

"You are quite determined?"

"Quite."

"You will go now to meet him, *now* when your anger is hot, and say to him what will surely grieve or wound him?"

"Let us talk sense," says Dulce, impatiently. "I shall simply warn him to have nothing more to do with a woman who looks upon him with scorn and contempt,"

As she speaks she enters the closet that is nothing more than a big wardrobe, and, as she does so, Portia, quick as thought follows her, and, closing the door behind her, turns the key in the lock.

"You shall stay there until you promise me to tell nothing of this hour's conversation to Fabian," she says, with determination.

"Then I shall probably stay here forever," replies Dulce from within, with equal determination.

Portia going over to the fire seats herself by it. Dulce going to the latticed window inside seats herself by *it.* An hour goes by. The little clock up over the mantelpiece chimes five. A gun is fired off in the growing dark outside. There is a sound as of many voices in the hall far down below. A laugh that belongs to Dicky Browne floats upwards, and makes itself heard in the curious stillness of the room above where the jailer sits guarding her prisoner.

Then Portia, rising, goes to the door of the condemned cell, and speaks as follows:

"Dulce."

There is no answer.

"Dulce; you are unwise not to answer me."

Still no answer; whereupon Portia, going back to the fire, lets another half hour pass in silence. Then she says, "Dulce!" again, and again receives no reply.

Time flies!—and now at last the dressing bell rings loud and clear through the house, warning the inmates that the best time in the day draws on apace.

"Dulce," says Portia, in despair, rising for the third time. To tell the truth, she is growing a little frightened at the persistent silence, and begins to wonder nervously if Dulce could get smothered in the small room, because of all the clothes that surround her.

"Dulce! *will* you promise?" she says. And now, to her relief, even though the words that come are unfavorable, Dulce answers.

"Never. Not if I stayed here till Doomsday," says Miss Blount, in uncompromising tones, and quite as unconcernedly as if she was sitting in the room outside instead of having been ignominiously incarcerated for the last two hours. "The very moment you open the door, I shall go down-stairs and tell him everything."

"Then I won't let you out," says Portia, feebly, because she knows that soon dinner will come, and then she *must* let her out willy-nilly.

"I didn't ask you," says the rebel. "Dress yourself now, I would advise you, and go down to dinner. I hope you will enjoy it. When they make inquiries about my non-appearance, I should think you will have to explain it later on."

"Come out," says Portia, with a sigh of utter weariness; and then she opens the door and the incarcerated one steps forth, and sails past her with the air of a haughty queen, and with an unlowered crest.

Miss Vibart is vanquished. Even to her own soul she confesses so much. Dulce, passing her in dignified silence, goes toward the bedroom that opens off the boudoir, where they have been carrying on this most civil (or rather *un*civil) war, and entering it, closes the door, and fastens it with unmistakable firmness behind her.

Conquered and subdued, and sick at heart, Portia traverses the corridor that divides her room from Dulce's, and prepares with languid interest to make her dinner toilette.

CHAPTER XIX.

"We must live our lives, though the sun be set,
Must meet in the masque, where parts we play,
Must cross in the maze of Life's minuet;
Our yea is yea, and our nay is nay:
But while snows of Winter or flowers of May,
Are the sad years' shroud or coronet,
In the season of rose or of violet,
I shall never forget till my dying day!"

A. LANG.

DINNER to-night, so far as Dulce and Portia are concerned, is gone through in utter silence. Not a word escapes either. To Portia, even to say yes or no to the butler, is a wearying of the flesh; to Dulce, it is an open annoyance. Their positive determination to enter into no conversation might have been observed sooner or later by somebody, but for Dicky Browne. He talks for everybody, and is, indeed, in such a genial mood, that their unusual silence passes unnoticed.

Fabian, too, for a wonder, has risen above his usual taciturnity and is almost talkative. A change so delightful to Sir Christopher, that he, in his turn, brightens up, and grows more festive than he has been for many a day. In fact, for all but the two girls, the dinner may be counted a distinct success.

Portia, who is dressed in filmy black, is looking white and nervous, and has in her eyes an intense wrapt expression, such as one might have whose nerves are all unstrung, and who is in momentary expectation of something unpleasant, that may or may not happen. Dulce on the contrary is flushed and angry. Her eyes are brilliant, and round her generally soft lips lies a touch of determination foreign to them, and hardly becoming.

Presently dinner comes to an end, and then the three women rise and rustle away toward the drawing-room, where follows a dreary half hour, indeed.

Julia, who is always drowsy after her claret, sinks complacently into the embrace of the cosiest arm-chair she can find, and under pretence of saving her priceless complexion (it really does cost a good deal) from the fire, drops into a gentle slumber behind her fan.

This makes things even harder for Portia and Dulce. I need hardly say they are not on speaking terms—that has explained itself, I hope. Thrown now, therefore, upon their own resources, they look anxiously around for a chance of mitigating the awkwardness of the situation that has thrust itself upon them.

At such trying moments as these how blessed is the society of children. Even crusty old bachelors, educated to the belief that the young and innocent are only one gigantic fraud, have been known on occasions like the present to bestow upon them a careful, not to say artful, attention.

To-night, Portia, Jacky and the Boodie are having it all their own way. "Quite a bully time, don't you know," says Master Jacky, later, to the all-suffering nurse, whose duty it is to look after them and put them to bed. They are talked to and caressed and made much of by both girls, to their excessive surprise; surprise that later on mounts to distrust.

"Why may I have this album to-night when I mighn't *last* night?" asks the Boodie, shrewdly, her big sapphire eyes bigger than usual. "You scolded me about it last night, and every

other time I touched it. And what's the matter with your eyes?" staring up at Portia, who has turned a page in the forbidden album, and is now gazing at a portrait of Fabian that is smiling calmly up at her.

It is a portrait taken in that happy time when all the world was fair to him, and when no "little rift" had come to make mute the music of his life. Portia is gazing at it intently. She has forgotten the child—the book—everything, even the fear of observation, and her eyes are heavy with unshed tears, and her hands are trembling.

Then the child's questioning voice comes to her; across the bridge of past years she has been vainly trying to travel, and perforce she gives up her impossible journey, and returns to the sure but sorry present.

Involuntarily she tightens her hand upon the Boodie's. There is entreaty in her pressure, and the child (children, as a rule, are very sympathetic), after a second stare at her, shorter than the first, understands, in a vague fashion, that silence is implored of her, and makes no further attempts at investigation.

After a little while the men come; all except Fabian. Their entrance is a relief to the girls, whatever it may be to Julia. She rouses herself by a supreme effort to meet the exigencies of the moment, and really succeeds in looking quite as if she has not been in the land of Nod for the past sweet thirty minutes.

"You have broken in upon a really delicious little bit of gossip," she says to Sir Mark, coquettishly; whereupon Sir Mark, as in duty bound, entreats her to retail it again to him.

She doesn't.

"I hope you have been miserable without us," says Dicky Browne, sinking into a chair beside Portia, and lifting the Boodie on to his knee. (It would be impossible to Dicky Browne to see a child anywhere without lifting it on to his knee). "We've been wretched in the dining-room; we thought Sir Christopher would never tip us the wink—I mean," correcting himself with assumed confusion, "give us the word to join you. What are you looking at? An album?"

"Yes; you may look at it, too," says Portia, pushing it anxiously towards him. She cannot talk to-night. There is a mental strain upon her brain that compels her to silence.

If he would only amuse himself with the caricatures of his friends the book contains.

But he won't. Mr. Browne rises superior to the feeble amusements of the ordinary drawing-room.

"No, thank you," he says, promptly. "Nothing on earth offends me more than being asked to look at an album. Why look at paper beauties when there are living ones in the room?"

Here he tries to look sentimental, and suceeds, at all events, in looking extremely funny. He has been having a good deal of champagne, and a generous amount of Burgundy, and is now as happy and contented as even his nearest and dearest could desire. Don't mistake me for a moment; nobody ever saw Mr. Browne in the very faintest degree as—well, as he ought not to be; but there is no denying that after dinner he is gaiety itself, and (as Dulce's governess used to say of him), "very excellent company indeed."

"I always feel," he goes on airily, still alluding to the despised album, "when any one asks me to look at a book of this kind, as if they thought I was a dummy and couldn't talk. And I *can* talk, you know."

"You can—you can, indeed," says Sir Mark, feelingly. "Dulce, what was that we were reading yesterday? I remember, now, a quotation from it *àpropos* of talking, *not àpropos* of our friend Dicky, of course. 'Then he will talk. Good gods, how he will talk!' Wasn't that it?"

"Sing us something, Dicky, do. You used to sing long ago," says Julia, insinuatingly, who thinks she might be able to accomplish another surreptitious doze under cover of the music.

"I've rather given it up of late," says Mr. Browne, with a modest air, and a chuck to his shirt collar.

"You used to sing 'Ye banks and braes o' bonny Doon' sweetly," says Julia, when she has recovered from a vigorous yawn, got through quite safely behind her sheet anchor—I mean her fan.

"Well—er—such a lot of fellows go in for the sickly sentimental; I'm tired of it," says Dicky, vaguely.

"You didn't tire of *that* song until that little girl of the Plunkets asked you what a 'brae' was and you couldn't tell her. She told me about it afterwards, and said you were a very amusing boy, but, she feared, uneducated. You gave

her the impression, I think," says Sir Mark, pleasantly, "that you believed the word had something to do with that noble (if tough) animal, the donkey!"

"I never told her anything of the kind," says Dicky, indignantly. "I never speak to her at all if I can help it. A most unpleasant girl, with a mouth from ear to ear and always laughing."

"What a fetching description," says Stephen Gower, with a smile.

"You *will* sing us something?" says Portia, almost entreatingly. She wants to be alone; she wants to get rid of Dicky and his artless prattle at any price.

"Certainly," says Mr. Browne, but with very becoming hesitation. "If I could only be sure what style of thing you prefer. I know a comic song or two, if you would like to hear them."

"Heavens and Earth!" murmurs Sir Mark, with a groan. He throws his handkerchief over his face, and places himself in an attitude suggestive of the deepest resignation.

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to remember *all* the words," says Dicky, regretfully. "There is any amount of verses, and all as funny as they can be. But I've a shocking memory."

"For small mercies—" says Sir Mark, mildly.

"Nevertheless I'll try," says Dicky, valiantly, moving toward the piano.

"No don't, Dicky," exclaims Sir Mark, with tearful entreaty. "It would break my heart if Portia were to hear you for the first time at a disadvantage. 'I had rather than forty shillings you had your book of songs and sonnets here,' but as you haven't, why, wait till you have. Now," says Sir Mark, casting a warning look upon the others; "I've done *my* part —hold him tight, some of you, or he will certainly do it still."

"Oh! if you don't *want* to hear me," returns Dicky, with unruffled good humor. "Why can't you say so at once, without so much beating about the bush. I don't want to sing."

"Thank you, Dicky," says Sir Mark, sweetly.

Stephen is sitting close to Dulce, and is saying something to her in a low tone. Her answers, to say the least of them, are somewhat irrelevant and disconnected. Now she rises,

and, murmuring to him a little softly-spoken excuse, glides away from him to the door, opens it, and disappears.

At this Portia, who has never ceased to watch her, grows even paler than she was before, and closes one hand so tightly on her fan that part of the ivory breaks with a little click.

Five minutes pass; to her they might be five interminable hours; and then, when she has electrified Mr. Browne by saying "yes" twice and "no" three times in the wrong places, she, too, gets up from her seat and leaves the room.

* * * * * * *

Before the fire in his own room Fabian is standing, with Dulce crying her heart out upon his breast. He has one arm around her, but his eyes are looking into a sad futurity, and he is gently, absently, tapping her shoulder with his left hand. He is frowning, not angrily, but thoughtfully, and there is an expression in his dark eyes that suggests a weariness of the flesh, and a longing to flee away and be at rest.

"Do not take this thing so much to heart," he says, in a rather mechanical tone, addressing his little sister, who is grieving so bitterly because of the slight that has been cast upon him from so unexpected a quarter. "She told you the truth; the very first moment my eyes met hers I knew she had heard all, and—had condemned."

He sighs wearily.

"Who shall blame her?" he says, with deepest melancholy.

"I blame her," cries Dulce, passionately. "Nay, more, I hate and despise her. She has seen you, known you. She must, therefore, be *mad—blind*—to credit so vile a thing of you, And you, my saint, my darling, what have you not endured all this time! Knowing everything, bearing everything, without a murmur or reproach. Her scorn, her contempt. Oh, Fabian! at least you do not suffer alone, for I suffer with you."

"That only adds another drop to my cup," replies he, gently. "It does not comfort me. I had some faint pleasure in the thought that you and she were friends, and now, even that belief is denied me. *I* have severed you. What have I to do with either she or you? My misfortune is my own, let

it be so. Your tears only aggravate my pain, my dear, *dear* little sister."

He draws her closer to him, and kisses her warmly. Is she not the one being who has clung to him, and loved him, and believed in him through good and evil report?

"Who could dream she was so deceitful?" says Dulce, tearfully, alluding to the unhappy Portia. "I never once even suspected the real truth. Why, over and over again she has spoken of you, has compelled me to discuss you, has seemed to court the subject of—"

"Spoken of *me!*"

"Yes, often—often, hundreds of times. She seemed never to tire of you and your history; I thought she—"

Dulce hesitates.

"Go on; you thought she —"

"Well, then," recklessly, "I thought she was in love with you; I was *sure* of it."

"Dulce," sharply, "you forget yourself. What are you saying? Do you think your cousin would like you to speak like this?"

"I don't care what she likes," cries the rebel, angrily; "as I am speaking like this, I hope she wouldn't. When I think how good you have always been to her, how you gave her your friendship—your—" her voice fails her, and in a whisper, she adds, "*your love.*"

"Do not let us discuss this subject any more," says Fabian; though he speaks quickly one can hear the keen anguish in his tone. "Why could I not give her my friendship? Is it her fault that she cannot believe?"

"You would defend her!"

"I would be just. Is she the *only* one who feels distrust, who only half credits my version of the miserable story? Here, in this very house, are there none who hesitate between faith and unfaith? You have faith in me, and Roger had."

"Oh, yes, yes, *yes!*" cries she, suddenly. "*He* had faith in you, *he* loved you." Without a word of warning she breaks again into a very tempest of tears, and sobs bitterly.

"I would you could have loved him," says Fabian, in a low tone, but she will not listen.

"Go on," she says, vehemently, "you were saying something about the people in this house."

"That, probably, after you and Roger, I have Dicky on my side," continues Fabian, obediently, a still deeper grief within his haggard eyes, "and, of course, Christopher and Mark Gore; but does Julia quite understand me? or Stephen Gower! Forgive me, dearest, for this last."

"Don't speak to me like that," entreats she, mournfully; "what is Stephen—what is anyone to me in comparison with you. Yet I will vouch for Stephen. But what is it you say of Julia—surely—"

"Yes—no doubt," impatiently. "But is her mind really satisfied? If to-morrow my innocence were shown up incontrovertibly to all the world, she would say. triumphantly, 'I told you so.' And if my guilt were established, she would say just as triumphantly, 'I told you so,' in the very same tone."

"You wrong her, I think. She has lived with you in this house off and on for many months, and few have so mean a heart as Portia."

Someone, who a minute ago opened the door very gently, and is now standing irresolute upon the threshold, turns very pale at this last speech and lays her hand upon her heart, as though fearing, though longing, to go forward.

"Perhaps I *do* wrong Julia," says Fabian, indifferently. "It hardly matters. But you must not wrong Portia. Our suspicions, as our likes and dislikes, are not under our control; now, for example, there is old Slyme; he hates me, as all the world can see, yet he would swear to my innocence to-morrow."

"How do you know that?"

"I *do* know it; by instinct, I suppose; I am one of those unhappy people who can see through their neighbors. In spite of the hatred he entertains for me (why I know not) his eyes betray the fact that he thinks me guiltless of the crime imputed to me. So you see, vulgar prejudice has nothing to do with it, and Portia is not to be censured because she cannot take me on trust."

"Oh, Fabian! how can you still love one who—"

"My dear, love and I are not to be named together, you forget that. I must live my life apart. You can only pray that my misery may be of short duration. But I would have you forgive Portia," he says, gently—nay, as her name falls from his lips, a certain tenderness characterises both his face and tone—"if only for *my* sake."

At this, the silent figure in the doorway draws her breath, painfully, and catches hold of the lintel as though to steady herself. Her lips tremble, a momentary fear that she may be going to faint terrifies her; then a voice, cold and uncompromising falling on her ears, restores her to something like composure.

"Do not ask me that, anything but that;" it is Dulce who is speaking. "I cannot."

At this, the girl standing in the doorway, as though unable to endure more, comes slowly forward, and advances until she is within the full glare of the lamplight. It is Portia. She is deadly pale; and her black robes clinging round her render the pallor of her face even more ghastly. She has raised one hand, and is trifling nervously with the string of pearls that always lies round her white throat; she does not look at Fabian, not even for one instant does she permit her eyes to to seek his, but lets them rest on Dulce, sadly, reproachfully.

"Why can you not forgive me?" she says; "is not your revenge complete? You have, indeed, kept your word. Now that I am sad at heart, why will you not try to forgive?"

"Yes—forgive." It is Fabian who says this; he lays his hand upon Dulce's arm, and regards her earnestly.

"*You* ask me to forgive—*you!* You would have me be kind to this traitress!" returns she, passionately, glancing back at Portia, over her shoulder, with angry eyes. "Do you forgive her yourself?"

"I am beyond the pale of forgiveness so far as he is concerned," says Portia, slowly. "It is to you I appeal. I have loved you well, that should count for something. As for your brother, I understand—I know that he will never forgive and never forget!"

"You are right," says Fabian, addressing her for the first time, yet without letting his glance meet hers, "I shall *never forget!*"

A sob rises in Portia's throat; there is a terrible sadness in his tone, the more terrible because of the stern restraint he has laid upon himself.

"Go to her," he says to Dulce, and the girl who has never disobeyed a wish of his in all her life goes up to Portia and lays her hand in hers.

Palm to palm, slender hands clasped close together, they move toward the door; Dulce, with bent head, trying to stay the mournful tears that are falling silently, one by one, down her cheeks; Portia, with head erect, but with an anguish in her lovely eyes sadder than any tears.

Just as she reaches the door she turns her head, and, with a passionate eagerness that will not be repressed, looks at Fabian. Their eyes meet. He makes a step toward her; he has forgotten everything but that he loves her, and that she—dearest but most agonizing of certainties—loves him, and that she is near him, searching, as it were, into his very soul; then remembrance comes to him, and, with a smothered groan, he turns from her, and, leaning his arms on the chimney-piece, buries his face in them.

Portia, to check the sob that rises in her throat, tightens her clasp on Dulce's hand and draws the girl quickly from the room. Perhaps, too, she seeks to hide his grief from other eyes than hers. The unwonted sharpness of her pressure, however, rouses Dulce from her sad thoughts, and as they reach the corrider outside she stops short, and glances half resentfully, half with a question on her face, at Portia.

The extreme pain and grief she sees in Portia's eyes awakens her to the truth; she draws her breath a little quickly and lays her hand impulsively upon her cousin's bare white arm.

"You suffer too—you!" she says, in a whisper full of surprise; "Oh, Portia! is it that you love him?"

"Has it taken you so long to discover that," says Portia, reproachfully, who has grown somewhat reckless because of the misery of the past few hours. The self-contained, proud girl is gone; a woman sick at heart, to whom the best good of this world is as naught, has taken her place. There is so much genuine pain in her voice that Dulce is touched; she forgets all, condones all; to see a fellow-creature in pain is terrible to this hot-blooded little shrew. The anger and disdain die out of her eyes, and coming even closer to Portia, she looks long and earnestly at her beautiful face.

"Oh, that you could believe in him," she says, at last, the expression of her desire coming from her in the form of a sigh.

"If I could, I should be too deeply blessed. Yet is it that I do not believe, or that I dread the world's disbelief? That is the sting. To know that a stain lies on the man I

love, to know that others distrust him, and will *forever* pass him by on the other side. That is the horror. Dulce, I am ignoble, I fear many things; the future terrifies me; but yet, as I am so wretched, dear, *dear* Dulce, take me back into your heart!"

She bursts into tears. They are so strange to her and have been so long denied, that by their very vehemence they frighten Dulce. She takes Portia in her arms, and clings to her; and, pressing her lips to her cheek, whispers to her fondly that she is forgiven, and that from her soul she pities her. Thus peace is restored between these two.

CHAPTER XX.

"Time tries the troth in everything."
—THOMAS TUSSER.

THE voice comes to her distinctly across the sward, browned by Winter's frown, and over the evergreens that sway and rustle behind her back.

"Shall I answer?" says Dulce to herself, half uncertainly; and then she hesitates, and then belies the old adage because she is not lost, but decides on maintaining a discreet silence. "If he comes," she tells herself, "he will only talk, *talk*, TALK! and, at his best, he is tiresome; and then he worries so that really life becomes a burden with him near. And the day, though cold, is bright and frosty and delicious, and all it should be at Christmas time, and when one is wrapped in furs one doesn't feel the cold," and she really means to enjoy herself with her book, and now—

"Dulce!" comes the voice again, only nearer this time, and even more pathetic in its anxiety, and Dulce moves uneasily. Perhaps, after all, she ought to answer. Has she not promised many things. Shall she answer or not, or—

This time her hesitation avails her nothing; a step can be heard dangerously close, and then a figure comes up to her very back, and peers through the thick hedge of evergreens, and finally Stephen makes his way through them and stands before her.

He is flushed and half angry. He is uncertain how to

translate the extreme unconcern with which she hails him. *Did* she hear him call, or did she not? That is the question. And Stephen very properly feels that more than the fate of a nation depends upon the solution of this mystery.

"Oh! here you are at last," he says, in a distinctly aggrieved tone. "I have been calling you for the last hour. Didn't you hear me?"

When one has been straining one's lungs in a vain endeavor to be heard by a beloved object, one naturally magnifies five minutes into an hour.

Dulce stares at him in a bewildered fashion. Her manner, indeed, considering all things, is perfect.

"Why didn't you answer me?" asks Mr. Gower, feeling himself justified in throwing some indignation into this speech.

"Were you calling me?" she asks, with the utmost innocence, letting her large eyes rest calmly upon his, and bravely suppressing the smile that is dying to betray her; "really? How was it I didn't hear you? I was sitting here all the time. These evergreens *must* be thick! Do you know I am horribly afraid I shall grow deaf in my old age, because there are moments even now—such, for example, as the present—when I cannot bring myself to hear *anything*."

This last remark contains more in it than appears to Mr. Gower.

"Yet, only last night," he says resentfully, "you told me it would be dangerous to whisper secrets near you to another, as you had the best ears in the world."

"Did I say all that? Well, perhaps, I am troublesome in that way sometimes," says Miss Blount, shifting her tactics without a quiver. "Just now," glancing at a volume that lies upon her lap, "I daresay it was the book that engrossed my attention; I quite lose myself in a subject when it is as interesting as this one is," with another glance at the dark bound volume on her knee.

Gower stoops and reads the title of the book that had come between him and the thoughts of his beloved. He reads it aloud, slowly and with grim meaning—"*Notes on Tasmanian Cattle!* It sounds enthralling," he says, with bitter irony.

"Yes, doesn't it," says Miss Blount, with such unbounded audacity, and with such a charming laugh as instantly scat-

ters all clouds. "You must know I adore cattle, especially Tasmanian cattle." As a mere matter of fact she had brought out this book by mistake, thinking it was one of George Eliot's, because of its cover, and had not opened it until now. "Come and sit here beside me," she says, sweetly, bent on making up for her former ungraciousness, "I have been so dull all the morning, and you wouldn't come and talk to me. So unfeeling of you."

"Much you care whether I come to talk to you or not," says Mr. Gower, with a last foolish attempt at temper. This foolish attempt makes Miss Blount at once aware that the day is her own.

"You may sit on the edge of my gown," she says, generously—she herself is sitting on a garden-chair made for one that carefully preserves her from all damp arising from the damp, wintry grass; "on the *very* edge, please. Yes, just there," shaking out her skirts; "I can't bear people close to me, it gives me a creepy-creepy feel. Do you know it?"

Mr. Gower shakes his head emphatically. No, he does not know the creepy-creepy feel.

"Besides," goes on Dulce, confidentially, "one can see the person one is conversing with so much better at a little distance. Don't you agree with me?"

"Don't I always agree with you?" says Mr. Gower, gloomily.

"Well, then, don't look so discontented, it makes me think you are only answering me as you think I want to be answered, and no woman could stand that."

Silence. The short day is already coming to a close. A bitter wind has sprung from the East and is now flitting with icy ardor over the grass and streamlet; through the bare branches of the trees, too, it flies, creating music of a mournful kind as it rushes onward.

"Last night I dreamt of you," says Stephen, at last.

"And what of me?" asks she, bending slightly down over him, as he lies at her feet in his favorite position.

"This one great thing: I dreamt that you loved me. I flattered myself in my dreams, did I not?" says Gower, with an affectation of unconcern that does not disguise the fear that is consuming him lest some day he shall prove his dream untrue.

> "Now what is love, I will thee tell,
> It is the fountain and the well
> Where pleasure and repentance dwell,"

quotes she, gaily, with a quick, trembling blush.

"I expect some fellows do all the repentance," says Stephen, moodily. Then, with a sudden accession of animation born of despair, he says, "Dulce, once for all, tell me if you can care for me even a little." He has taken her hand—of course her right hand on which a ring is—and is clasping it in the most energetic manner. The ring has a sharp diamond in it, and consequently the pressure creates pain. She bears it, however, like a Cranmer.

"I don't think even my angelic temper would stand a cross-examination on such a day as this," she says, with a slight frown; it might be slighter but for the diamond. "Besides, I have made answer to that question a thousand times. Did I not, indeed, answer it in the most satisfactory manner of all when I promised to marry you?"

"Yes, you promised to marry me, I know that, but when?" asks he, quickly. "Up to this you have always declined to name any particular date."

"Naturally," says Miss Blount, calmly. "I'm not even dreaming of being married yet, why should I? I should hate it,"

"Oh! if you would hate it," says Stephen, stiffly.

"Yes, hate it," repeats she, undauntedly. "Why, indeed, should we be married for years? I am quite happy, aren't you?"

No answer. Then, very severely, "Aren't *you?*"

"Yes, of course," says Mr. Gower, but in a tone that belies his words.

"Just so," says Dulce, "then let us continue happy. I am sure all these past months I have been utterly content."

"You mean ever since Roger's departure?" asks he, eagerly.

"Yes; principally, I suppose *because* of his departure." There is a good deal of unnecessary warmth in this speech. Yet the flush has faded from her cheeks now, and she is looking down toward the sea with a little set expression round her usually mobile lips.

"We are happy now, but why should we not be even happier if we were married?" asks Stephen, presently, trying to read her averted face.

"Why? Who can answer that?" exclaims she, turning

her face inland again, with a little saucy smile. Her thoughts of a moment since are determinately put out of sight, resolutely banished. "You surely don't believe at this time of day that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush? That is old-world rubbish! Take my word for it, that *two* birds in the hand do not come up to even one sweet, provoking, unattainable bird in the bush!"

She has risen, and is now standing before him, as she says this, with her hands clasping each other behind her head, and her body well thrown back. Perhaps she does not know how charming her figure appears in this position. Perhaps she does. She is smiling down at Gower in a half defiant, wholly tantalizing fashion, and is as like the "sweet, provoking, unattainable bird" as ever she can be.

Rising slowly to his feet, Gower goes up to her, and, as is his lawful right, encircles her bonnie round waist with his arm.

"I don't know about the bird," he says, "but this I *do* know, that in my eyes you are worth two of anything in all this wide world."

His tone is so full of feeling, so replete with real, unaffected earnestness and affection that she is honestly touched. She even suffers his arm to embrace her (for the time being), and turns her eyes upon him kindly enough.

"How fond you are of me," she says, regretfully. "Too fond. I am not worth it." Then, in a curious tone, "How strange it is that you should love me so dearly when Roger actually *disliked* me!"

"You are always thinking of your cousin," exclaims he, with a quick frown. "He seems never very far from your thoughts."

"How can I help that," says Dulce, with an attempt at lightness; "it is so difficult to rid the mind of a distasteful subject."

"And," eagerly—"it is a distasteful subject? You are really glad your engagement with him is at an end?"

"Of course I am glad," says Miss Blount, impatiently; "why should I be otherwise? How often have you told me yourself that he and I were unsuited to each other—and how many times have you reminded me of his unbearable temper! I hope," with passionate energy, "I shall never see him again!"

"Let us forget him," says Gower, gently; "there are plenty of other things to discuss besides him. For one thing, let me tell you this—that though we have been engaged for a long time now, you have never once kissed me."

"Yes—and don't you know why?" asks Miss Blount, sweetly, and with all the air of one who is about to impart the most agreeable intelligence—"Can't you guess? It is because I think kissing a *mistake*. Not only a mistake, but a positive *bêtise*. It commonizes everything, and—and—is really death to sentiment in my opinion."

"Death to it?—an aid to it, I should say," says Mr. Gower, bluntly.

"Should you? I am sure experience will prove you wrong," says Dulce, suavely, "and, at all events, I hate being kissed."

"Do you? Yet twice I saw you let your cousin kiss you," says Stephen, gloomily.

"And see what came of it," retorts she, quickly. "He got—that is—we *both* got tired of each other. And then we quarrelled—we were always quarrelling, it seems to me now—and then he—that is, we *both* grew to hate each other, and that of course ended everything. I really think," says Miss Blount, with suppressed passion, "I am the one girl in the world he cordially dislikes and despises. He almost told me so before—before we parted."

"Just like him, unmannerly beast!" says Mr. Gower, with deep disgust.

"It was just as well we found it all out in time," says Dulce, with a short, but heavily-drawn sigh—probably, let us hope so, at least—one of intense relief, "because he was really tiresome in most ways."

"I rather think so; I'm sure I wonder how you put up with him for so long," says Gower, contemptuously.

"Force of habit, I suppose. He was always in the way when he wasn't wanted. And—and—and the other thing," says Miss Blount, broadly, who wants to say '*vice versa*,' but cannot remember it at this moment.

"Never knew when to hold his tongue," says Stephen, who is a rather silent man; "never met such a beggar to talk."

"And so headstrong," says Dulce, pettishly.

"Altogether, I think he is about the greatest ass I ever

met in my life," says Mr. Gower, with touching conviction, and out of the innocence of his heart.

"Is he?" asks Dulce, with a sudden and most unexpected change of tone. A frown darkens the fair face. Is it that she is looking back with horror upon the time when she was engaged to this "ass," or is it—"You have met a good many, no doubt?"

"Well, a considerable few in my time," replies he. "But I must say I never saw a poorer specimen of his kind—and his name, too, such an insane thing. Reminds one of that romping old English dance and nothing else. Why on earth couldn't the fellow get a respectable name like any other fellow."

This is all so fearfully absurd, that at any other time, and under any other circumstances, it would have moved Dulce to laughter.

"Isn't the name, Roger, respectable?" asks she, sweetly, as though desirous of information.

"Oh, well, it's respectable enough, I suppose; or at least it is hideous enough for that or anything."

"Must a thing be hideous to be respectable?" asks she again, turning her lovely face, crowned with the sunburnt hair, full on his.

"You don't understand me," he says, with some confusion. "I was only saying what an ugly name Dare has."

"Now, *do* you think so?" wonders Miss Blount, dreamily, "I don't. I can't endure my cousin, *as you know*, but I really think his name very pretty, quite the prettiest I know, even," innocently, "prettier than Stephen!"

"I'm sorry I can't agree with you," says Stephen, stiffly.

Miss Blount, with her fingers interlaced, is watching him furtively, a little petulant expression in her eyes.

"It seems to me you think more of your absent cousin than of—of anyone in the world," says Gower, sullenly. Fear of what her answer may be has induced him to leave his own name out of the question altogether.

"As I told you before, one always thinks most of what is unpleasing to one."

"Oh, I daresay!" says Mr. Gower.

"I don't think I quite understand you. What do you mean by that?" asks she, with suspicious sweetness.

"Dulce," says Stephen, miserably, "say you *hate* Roger."

"I have often said it. I detest him. Why," with a sudden touch of passion, "do you make me repeat it over and over again? Why do you make me think of him at all?"

"I don't know," sadly. "It is madness on my part, I think; and yet I believe I have no real cause to fear him He is so utterly unworthy of you. He has behaved so badly to you from first to last."

"What you say is all *too* true," says Dulce, calmly; then, with most suspicious gentleness, and a smile that is all "sweetness and light," "*would* you mind removing your arm from my waist. It makes me feel faint. Thanks, *so* much."

After this silence again reigns. Several minutes go by, and nothing can be heard save the soughing of the rising wind, and the turbulent rushing of the stream below. Dulce is turning the rings round and round upon her pretty fingers; Stephen is looking out to sea with a brow as black as thunder, or any of the great gaunt rocks far out to the West, that are frowning down upon the unconscious ocean.

Presently something—perhaps it is remorse—strikes upon Dulce's heart and softens her. She goes nearer to him and slips one small, perfect hand through his arm, she even presses his arm to her softly, kindly, with a view to restoring its owner to good temper.

This advance on her part has the desired effect. Stephen forgets there is such a thing as a sea, and, taking up the little, penitent hand, presses it tenderly to his lips.

"Now, do not let us be disagreeable any more," says Dulce, prettily. "Let us try to remember what we were talking about before we began to discuss Roger."

Mr. Gower grasps his chance.

"I was saying that though we have been engaged now for some time you have never once kissed me," he says, hopefully.

"And would you," reproachfully, "after all I have said, risk the chance of making me, perhaps, hate you, too? I have told you how I detest being kissed, yet now you would argue the point. Oh, Stephen! is this your vaunted love?"

"But it is a curious view you take of it, isn't it, darling?" suggests Gower, humbly, "to say a kiss would raise hatred in your breast. I am perfectly certain it would make *me* love *you* MORE!"

"Then you could love me more?" with frowning reproach.

"No, no! I didn't mean that, only—"

"I must say I am greatly disappointed in you," says Miss Blount, with lowered eyes. "I shouldn't have believed it of you. Well, as you are bent on rushing on your fate, I'll tell you what I will do."

"What?" he turns to her, a look of eager expectancy on his face. Is she going to prove kind at last?

"Some time," begins she, demurely, "no doubt I shall marry you—some time, that is, in the coming century—and then, when the time is finally arranged, just the very morning of our marriage, you shall kiss me, not before. That will prevent our having time to quarrel and part."

"Do you mean to tell me," indignantly, "you have made up your mind never to kiss me until we are married?"

"Until the morning *of* our marriage," corrects she.

"You might as well say *never!*" exclaims Gower, very justly incensed.

"I will, if you like," retorts she, with the utmost *bonhommie.*

"It is getting too cold for you to stay out any longer," says Stephen, with great dignity; "come, let us return to the house."

CHAPTER XXI.

"'Tis impossible to love and be wise."

THEY return. The early Winter night has fallen, and in the smaller drawing-room the curtains are already drawn, and though no lamps are lit, a sweet, chattering, gossiping fire sheds a radiance round that betrays all things to the view.

As Dulce enters the room everyone says, "Well, Dulce," in the pleasantest way possible, and makes way for her, but Miss Blount goes into the shade and sits there in a singularly silent fashion.

Sir Mark, noting her mood, feels within him a lazy desire to go to her and break the unusual taciturnity that surrounds her.

"Why so mute, fair maid?" he asks, dropping into a chair near hers.

"Am I mute?" she asks in her turn, thereby betraying the fact that she has been very far from them in her inmost thoughts.

"Rather," says Sir Mark; "would you think me rude if I asked the subject of your waking dreams?"

"No; I was merely thinking what an unsatisfactory place this world is." She says this slowly, turning her large eyes somewhat wistfully on his. If she likes any one on earth honestly it is Mark Gore.

"What a morbid speech," returns he. "Do you want a footstool, or a cup of tea, or what? Evidently something has made the whole world gray to you. And I can't even agree with you, I think this present world an uncommonly good old place, all things considered. Rough on us now and then, but quite possible."

"You are happy," she says.

"And you?"—he lets his keen eyes seek hers—"of what can you complain? You seem one of fortune's favorites. Have you not got as your most devoted slave the man of your heart?"

"I suppose so." There is a thorough lack of enthusiasm in her tone, that irritates him. He puts the end of his mustache into his mouth and chews it slowly, a certain sign that he is both grieved and annoyed. Then he changes his glass from his right eye to his left, after all of which he feels better for the moment.

"And besides," he says, with a valiant determination to follow his cross-examination to its bitter end, "you have successfully got rid of the man you hate. I refer to Roger."

"I suppose so." Just the same answer, in just the same tone.

Sir Mark is plainly indignant. Perhaps he had hoped to see her betray some emotion on the mention of her cousin's name, but if so he is disappointed.

"You grow apathetic," he says, somewhat sharply. "Soon you will care for nothing. A bad trick for any girl to learn."

"I have learned that trick already. I care for very little now?" says Dulce, in a perfectly even tone. Her hands, lying in her lap, are without motion. Her eyelids are without a tremor. "And yet she is *not* heartless," says Sir Mark to himself, reflectively. "I suppose she is only acting for

my special benefit, and though it is rather a good performance, it is of no earthly use, as I can see right through her."

Nevertheless he is angry with her, and presently rising, he goes away from her to where Dicky Browne is holding high revelry amongst his friends.

Dicky has only just arrived. He has been absent all day, and is now being questioned—desired to give an account of himself and his time ever since breakfast-time.

"It is something new to be asked where I have been," says Mr. Browne, who also thinks it will be as new as it is nice for him to take the aggrieved tone and go in heavily on the ill-used tack.

"Never mind that," says Julia; "tell us only—where *have* you been?"

"Well, really, I hardly quite know," says Dicky, delightfully vague as usual. "Round about the place, don't you know."

"But you must remember where?"

"As a rule," says Mr. Browne, meditatively, "I come and go, and no account is taken of my wanderings. To night all is different, now I am put under a cross-examination that reduces me to despair. This is unfair, it is cruel. If you would always act thus it would be gratifying, but to get up an interest in me on rare occasions such as the present, is, to say the least of it, embarrassing. I am half an orphan, some of you might be a father to me sometimes."

"So we will, Dicky, in a body," says Mark Gore, cheerfully.

"I like that," says Portia, laughing. "Instead of looking after *you*, Dicky, I rather think we want some one to look after *us*."

"Well, I'll do that with pleasure," says Mr. Browne. "It is my highest ambition. To be allowed to look after you has been the dream of my life for months:

> "'Thy elder brother I would be,
> Thy *father*, *anything* to thee!'"

"By-the-by, Dicky, where is your father now?" asks Stephen Gower, who is leaning against the mantelpiece in Dulce's vicinity, but not quite close to her. Ill-temper, called dignity, forbids his nearer approach to his goddess.

"Down South," says Dicky. "*Not* in Carolina, exactly, but in Devon. It *does* remind one of the ten little nigger

boys, doesn't it?" Then he begins with a quite uncalled for amount of energy, "'Eight little nigger boys traveling in Devon, one overslept hisself, and then there were seven,'" and would probably have continued the dismal ditty up to the bitter end, but that Sir Mark calls him up sharp.

"Never mind the niggers," he says, "tell us about your father. Where is he now?"

"Down at the old place, cursing his fate, no doubt. By-the-bye, talking of my ancestral home, I wish some day you would all come and put in a month there. Will you?"

"We will," says Julia, directly. Julia is always ready to go anywhere, children and all, at a moment's notice.

"Is it a nice place, Dicky?" asks Sir Mark, cautiously.

"No, it isn't," says Mr. Browne; "not *now*, you know. I hear it used to be; but there's no believing old people, they lie like fun. I'll get it settled up for all of you, if you'll promise to come, but just at present it isn't much. It is an odd old place, all doors and dust, and rats, I shouldn't wonder."

"That's nothing," says Gower. "Anything else against it?"

"Well, I don't know," replies Dicky, gloomily. "It *smells*, I think."

"Smells! good gracious, of what?" asks Julia.

"*Bones!*" says Mr. Browne, mysteriously. "*Dead* bones!"

"What sort of bones?" asks Portia, starting into life, and really growing a little pale, even beneath the crimson glare of the pine logs.

"Human bones!" says Dicky, growing more gloomy as he says this, and marks with rapture the impression it makes upon his audience. "It reminds one of graves, and sarcophaguses, and cemeteries, and horrid things that rustle in coffin cloths, and mop and mow in corners. But if you will come, I will make you all heartily welcome."

"Thank you. No, I don't think *I'll* come," says Julia, casting an uneasy glance behind her; the recesses of the room are but dimly lit, and appear ghostlike, highly suggestive of things uncanny from where she sits. "Dicky," pathetically, not to say affrightedly, "you have told us plenty about your horrid old house; don't tell us any more."

"There isn't any more to tell," says Dicky, who is quite content with his success so far.

"You haven't yet told us where you were all day," says Portia, lowering her fan to look at him.

"In the village for the most part—I dote on the village—interviewing the school and the children. Mr. Redmond got hold of me, and took me in to see the infants. It was your class I saw, I think, Dulce; it was so uncommonly badly behaved."

Dulce, in her dark corner, gives no sign that she has heard this gracious speech.

"I don't think much of your schoolmaster either," goes on Mr. Browne, unabashed. "His French, I should say, is not his strong point. Perhaps he speaks it 'after the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,' for certainly 'Frenche of Paris, is to him unknowe?'"

"I shouldn't think one would look for foreign languages from a village schoolmaster," says Sir Mark, lazily.

"I *didn't* look for it, my good fellow, he absolutely showered it upon me; and in the oddest fashion. I confess I didn't understand him. He has evidently a trick of coloring his conversation with fine words—a trick beyond me."

"What did he say to you, Dicky?" asks Julia, whose curiosity is excited.

"He told me a story," says Mr. Browne; "I'll tell it again to you now, if you like, but I don't suppose you *will* like, because, as I said before, I don't understand it myself. It was hardly a story either, it was more a diatribe about his assistant."

"Peter Greene?"

"Ye—es. This objectionable young man's name was Peter, though, if the the schoolmaster is to be believed, he isn't *green*. 'Sir,' said he to me, 'that Peter is a bad lot—no worse. He can teach the Latin, and the Greek, and the astronomy, fust-class; but as for probity or truth, or honest dealin's of any sort, he is *au revoir!*' What on earth did he mean?" says Mr. Browne, turning a face, bright with innocence, upon the group that surrounds the fire.

"To-morrow will be Christmas Day," says the Boodie, suddenly. She is lying, as usual, full length upon the hearth-rug, with her chin sunk between both her palms, and her eyes fixed upon the fire. This remark she addresses apparently to a glowing cinder. "I wonder if I shall get many presents," she says, "and if they will be things to *love*."

"How sweet it is to study the simplicity, the lack of mercenary thought in the little child," says Dicky, regarding her with admiration; "now this dear Boodie of ours would quite

as soon have an ugly present as a pretty one; she thinks only of the affection of the giver of it."

"I do not," says the Boodie, stoutly, "and I'd *hate* an ugly present;" then, with a sudden change of tone, "have you anything for me?"

"Darling," murmured Julia, with mild reproof.

"Certainly not," says Mr. Browne, promptly; "I want you to love me for myself alone!"

"*Really* nothing?" persists the Boodie, as if unable to credit her senses.

"Really nothing."

"Then what did you go to London for last week?" demands the irate Boodie, with rising and totally unsuppressed indignation.

This question fills Mr. Browne with much secret amusement.

"There have been rare occasions," he says, mildly, "on which I have gone to town to do a few other things besides purchasing gifts for you."

"I never heard anything so mean," says the Boodie, alluding to his unprofitable visit to the metropolis, "I wouldn't" —with the finest, the most withering disgust—"have believed it of you! And let me tell you this, Dicky Browne, I'll take very good care I don't give you the present I have been keeping for you for a whole week; and by-and-bye, when you hear what it is, you will be sorrier than ever you were in your life."

This awful speech she delivers with the greatest gusto. Mr. Browne, without a moment's hesitation, flings himself upon his knees before her in an attitude suggestive of the direst despair.

"Oh, *don't* do me out of my Christmas-box," he entreats, tearfully; "I know what your gifts are like, and I would not miss one for any earthly consideration. My lovely Boodie! reconsider your words. I *will* give you a present to-morrow" (already the biggest doll in Christendom is in her nurse's possession, with strict injunctions to let her have it, with his love and a kiss, the first thing in the morning); "I'll do *anything*, if you will only bestow upon me the priceless treasure at which you have darkly hinted."

"Well, we'll see," returns the Boodie, in a reserved tone

after which Mr. Browne once more returns to his seat and his senses.

But, unfortunately, the Boodie has not yet quite finished all she has to say. Rolling her little, lithe body over until she rests upon her back, and letting her arms fall behind her sunny head in one of her graceful, kittenish ways, she says, pathetically:

"Oh, how I wish Roger was here! He always was good to us, wasn't he, Pussy?" to her sister, who is striving hard to ruin her sight by stringing glass beads in the flickering firelight. "I wonder where he is now!"

As Roger Dare's name has been tabooed amongst them of late, this direct and open allusion to him falls like a thunderbolt in their midst.

Nobody says anything. Nobody does anything. Only in one dark corner, where the light does not penetrate, one white hand closes nervously upon another, and the owner of both draws her breath hurriedly.

Dicky Browne is the first to recover himself. He comes to the rescue with the most praiseworthy nonchalance.

"Didn't you hear about him?" he asks the Boodie, in a tone replete with melancholy. "He traveled too far, his hankering after savages was as extraordinary as it was dangerous; in *his* case it has been fatal. One lovely morning, when the sun was shining, and all the world was alight with smiles, they caught him. It was breakfast hour, and they were hungry; therefore they ate him (it is their playful habit), nicely fried in tomato sauce."

At this doleful tale, Jacky, who is lying about in some other corner, explodes merrily, Pussy following suit; but the Boodie, who is plainly annoyed at this frivolous allusion to her favorite, maintains her gravity and her dignity at the same time.

"Nobody would eat Roger," she says.

"Why not? Like 'the boy, Billie,' he is still 'young and tender.'"

"Nobody would be unkind to Roger," persists the Boodie, unmoved. "And besides, when he was going away he told me he would be back on New Year's Day, and Roger never told a lie."

"'He will return, I know him well,'" quotes Mr. Browne.

This quotation is thrown away upon the Boodie.

"Yes, he will," she says, in all good faith. "He will be here, I *know*, to-morrow week. I am going to keep the present I have for him, until then. I'm afraid I won't be able to keep it any longer," says the Boodie, regretfully, "because—"

She hesitates.

"Because it wouldn't let you. I know what it is, it is chocolate creams," says Dicky Browne, making this unlucky speech triumphantly.

It is too much! The bare mention of these sweetmeats, fraught as they are to her with bitterest memories, awake a long slumbering grief within Dulce's breast. Fretted by her interview with Stephen; sore at heart because of the child's persistent allusion to her absent cousin, this last stab, this mention of the curious cause of their parting, quite overcomes her.

Putting up her hands to her face, she rises precipitately to her feet, and then, unable to control herself, bursts into tears.

"Dulce! what is it?" exclaims Portia, going quickly to her, and encircling her with her arms. Stephen, too, makes a step forward, and then stops abruptly.

"It is nothing—nothing," sobs Dulce, struggling with her emotion; and then, finding the conflict vain, and that grief has fairly conquered her, she lays down her arms, and clinging to Portia, whispers audibly, with all the unreasoning sorrow of a tired child, "*I want Roger.*"

Even as she makes it, the enormity of her confession comes home to her, and terrifies her. Without daring to cast a glance at Stephen, who is standing rigid and white as death against the mantlepiece, she slips out of Portia's arms and escapes from the room.

Another awkward pause ensues. Decidedly this Christmas Eve is not a successful one. To tell the truth, everyone is very much frightened, and is wondering secretly how Stephen will take it. When the silence has become positively unbearable, Sir Mark rises to the situation.

"That is just like Dulce," he says—and really the amount of feigned amusement he throws into his tone is worthy of all admiration; though to be quite honest I must confess it imposes upon nobody—"when she is out of spirits she invariably asks for somebody on whom she is in the habit of venting her spleen. Poor Roger! he is well out of it to-night, I think. We have all noticed, have we

not," turning, with abject entreaty in his eyes, to every one in the room except Stephen, "that Dulce has been very much depressed during the last hour?"

"Yes, we have all noticed that," says Portia, hurriedly, coming nobly to his assistance.

Dicky Browne, stooping towards her, whispers, softly:

> "Quoth Hudibras—'It is in vain,
> I see, to argue 'gainst the grain!'"

"I don't understand," says Portia; just because she doesn't want to.

"Don't you?—well, you ought. Can't you see that, in spite of her determination to hate Roger, she loves him a thousand times better than that fellow over there?—and I'm very glad of it," winds up Dicky, viciously, who has always sorely missed Roger, and, though when with him quarrelled from dawn to dewy eve, he still looks upon him as the one friend in the world to whom his soul cleaveth.

"Yes, I, too, have noticed her curious silence. Who could have vexed her! Was it you, Stephen?" asks Julia, who is as clever as Dicky at always saying the wrong thing."

"Not that I am aware of," replies Gower, haughtily. Calling to mind his late conversation with his betrothed, he naturally looks upon himself as the aggrieved party. All she had said then, her coldness, her petulance—worse than all, her indifference—are still fresh with him, and rankles within his breast. Coming a little more into the ruddy light of the fire, he says, slowly, addressing Portia,

"As—as Miss Blount seems rather upset about something, I think I shall not stay to dinner to-night. Will you excuse me to her?"

"Oh, do stay!" says Portia, uncertain how to act. She says this, too, in spite of a pronounced prod from Dicky Browne, who is plainly desirous of increasing the rupture between Stephen and Dulce. May not such a rupture reinstate Roger upon his former throne? Oddly enough, Dicky, who has no more perspicacity than an owl, has arranged within himself that Roger would be as glad to renew his old relations with Dulce as she would be to renew hers with him.

"There are other things that will take me home to-night, irrespective of Dulce," says Stephen, smiling upon Portia, and telling his lie valiantly. "Good night, Miss Vibart."

And then he bids adieu to the others, quite composedly, though his brain is on fire with jealousy, not even omitting the children. Sir Mark and Dicky, feeling some vague compassion for him, go with him to the hall door, and there, having bidden him a hearty farewell, send him on his way.

"I give you my word," say Dicky Browne, confidentially detaining Sir Mark, forcibly, "we haven't had a happy day since she engaged herself to Gower; I mean since Roger's departure. Look here, Gore, it is my opinion she doesn't care *that* for him," with an emphatic and very eloquent snap of his fingers.

"For once in my life, Dicky, I entirely agree with you," says Sir Mark, gloomily.

CHAPTER XXII.

> "Sir. You are very welcome to our house,
> It must appear in other ways than words
> Therefore I scout this breathing courtesy."
> —SHAKSPEARE.

FROM Christmas Day to New Year's Day we all know is but a week—but *what* a week it is! For my part I think this season of supposed jollity the most uncomfortable and foriorn of any in the year. During all these seven interminable days the Boodie still clings to her belief in Roger, and vows he will surely return before the first day of '82 shall have come to an end. It is very nearly at an end now; the shadows have fallen long ago; the night wind has arisen; the snow that all day long has been falling slowly and steadily, still falls, as if quite determined never again to leave off.

They are all sitting in the library, it bemg considered a snugger room on such a dreary evening that the grander drawing-room. Stephen Gower, who has just come in, is standing by the centre-table with his back to it, and is telling them some little morsel of scandal about a near neighbor. It is a bare crumb, yet it is received with avidity and gratitude, and much laughter, so devoid of interest have been all the other hours of the day.

Nobody quite understands how it now is with Dulce and Stephen. That they have patched up their late quarrel is

apparent to everybody, and as far as an ordinary eye can see, they are on as good terms with each other as usual.

Just now she is laughing even more merrily than the rest at his little story, when the door opens, and Sir Christopher and Fabian enter together.

Sir Christopher is plainly very angry, and is declaring in an extremely audible voice that "he will submit to it no longer;" he furthermore announces that he has "seen too much of it," whatever "*it*" may be, and that for the future he "will turn over a very different leaf." I wonder how many times in the year this latter declaration is made by everybody?

Fabian, who is utterly unmoved by his vehemence, laying his hand upon his uncle's shoulder, leads him up to the fire-place and into the huge arm-chair, that is his perpetual abiding-place.

"What is it?" asks Sir Mark, looking up quickly.

"Same old story," says Fabian, in a low voice, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "Slyme. Drink. Accounts anyhow. And tipsy insolence, instead of proper explanation." As Fabian finishes, he draws his breath hastily, as though heartily sick and tired of the whole business.

Now that he is standing within the glare of the fire, one can see how altered he is of late. His cheeks are sunken, his lips pale. There is, too, a want of energy about him, a langour, a listlessness, that seems to have grown upon him with strange rapidity, and which suggests the possibility that life has become rather a burden than a favor.

If I say he looks as dead tired as a man might look who has been for many hours engaged in a labor trying both to soul and body, you will, perhaps, understand how Fabian looks now to the eyes that are gazing wistfully upon him from out the semi-darkness.

Moving her gown to one side, Portia (impelled to this action by some impulsive force) says, in a low tone:

"Come and sit here, Fabian," motioning gently to the seat beside her.

But, thanking her with great courtesy, he declines her invitation, and, with an unchanged face, goes on with his conversation with Sir Mark.

Portia, flushing hotly in the kindly dark, shrinks back within herself, and, taking her fingers tightly together, tries

bravely to crush the mingled feelings of shame and regret that rise within her breast.

"I can stand almost anything myself, I confess, but insolence," Sir Mark is saying, *à propos* of the intoxicated old secretary. "It takes it out of one so. I have put up with the most gross carelessness rather than change any man, but insolence from that class is insufferable. I suppose," says Sir Mark, meditatively, shifting his glass from his left to his right eye, "it is because one can't return it."

"One can dismiss the fellow, though," says Sir Christopher, still fuming. "And go Slyme shall. After all my kindness to him. too, to speak as he did to-night! The creature is positively without gratitude."

"Don't regret that," says Dicky Browne, sympathetically. "*You* are repining because he declines to notice your benefits; but think of what Wordsworth says—

> 'I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds,
> With coldness still returning;
> Alas! the *gratitude* of men
> Has oftener left me mourning.'

Look here, Sir Christopher, my experience is, that if once you do a fellow a good turn he'll stick to you through life, and make you feel somehow as if he belonged to you, and *that* isn't pleasant, is it?"

Dicky pauses. Wordsworth is his strong point, and freely he quotes and misquotes him on all occasions. Indeed, I am of the opinion he is the only poet Dicky ever read in his life, and that because he was obliged to.

"I have done with Slyme," goes on Sir Christopher, hotly. "Yes, *forever*. Now, not a word, Fabian; when my mind is made up (as you all know) it is made up, and nothing can alter it." This is just what they do *not* all know. "As for you," continues Sir Christopher, indignantly, addressing himself solely to Fabian, "you plead for that miserable old sot out of nothing but sheer obstinacy—not because you like him. Now, *do* you like him? Come now, I defy you to say it."

Fabian laughs slightly.

"There, I knew it!" exclaims Sir Christopher, triumphantly, though Fabian in reality has said nothing; "and as for him, he positively detests you. What did he say just now?—that he—"

"Oh, never mind that," says Fabian, poking the fire somewhat vigorously.

"Do let us hear it," says Julia, in her usual lisping manner. "Horrid old man; I am quite afraid of him, he looks so like a gnome, or—or—one of those ugly things the Germans write about. What did he say of dear Fabian?"

"That he had him in his power," thunders Sir Christopher, angrily. "That he could make or unmake him, as the fancy seized him, and so on. Give you my honor," says Sir Christopher, almost choking with rage, "it was as much as ever I could do to keep my hands off the fellow!"

Portia, sinking further into her dark corner, sickens with apprehension at these words. Suspicion, that now, alas! has become a certainty, is crushing her. Perhaps before this she has had her doubts—vague doubts, indeed, and blessed in the fact that they may admit of contradiction. But now—*now*—

What was it Slyme had said? That he could either "make or unmake him;" that he "had him in his power." Does Slyme, then, know the—the *truth* about him? Was it through *fear* of the secretary that Fabian had acted as his defender, supporting him against Sir Christopher's honest judgment? How quickly he had tried to turn the conversation; how he had seemed to shrink from deeper investigation of Slyme's impertinence. All seems plain to her, and with her supposed knowledge comes a pain, too terrible almost to be borne in secret.

Fabian, in the meantime, had seated himself beside Julia, and is listening to some silly remarks emanated by her. The Boodie, who is never very far from Fabian when he is in the room, is sitting on his knee with her arms around his neck.

"Come here, Boodie," says Dicky Browne, insinuatingly. "You used to say you loved me."

"So I do," says the Boodie, in fond remembrance of the biggest doll in Christendom. "But—

She hesitates.

"'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not Fabian more,'" parodies Mr. Browne, regretfully. "Well, I forgive you. But I thought it was Roger on whom you had set your young affections. By the by, he has disappointed you, hasn't he? Here is New Year's Day, and he has not returned to redeem his promise."

"He will come yet," says the Boodie, undauntedly.

"'He will return; I know him well,'" again quotes Mr. Browne; "that's your motto, I suppose, like the idiotic young woman in the idiotic song. Well, I admire faith myself; there's nothing like it."

"Don't mind him," says Fabian, tenderly, placing his arm round the discomfited Boodie, and pressing her pretty blonde head down upon his breast. "I don't understand him, so, of course, you don't."

"But why?" says Dicky Browne, who is evidently bent on mischief; "she has a great deal more brains than you have. Don't be aspersed by him, Boodie; *you* can understand me, I know, but I dare say I can soar higher than he can follow, and what I say to you contains 'thoughts that lie beyond the reach of his few words of English speech.'"

"Thank you," says Fabian.

The Boodie is plainly puzzled.

"I don't know what you mean," she says to Dicky; "I only know this," defiantly, "that I am certain Roger will return to-night, even if I am in bed when he comes."

The words are hardly out of her mouth when the door opens and somebody appears upon the threshold. This somebody has had an evident tussle with the butler outside, who, perhaps, would fain have announced him, but having conquered the king of the servants' hall, the somebody advances slowly until he is midway between the centre of the room and the direct glare of the firelight.

Every one grows very silent. It is as though a spell has fallen upon them all; all, that is, except Dulce. She, rising hurriedly from her seat, goes toward the stranger.

"It is *Roger!*" she cries suddenly, in so glad a voice, in a voice so full of delight and intense thankfulness, that every one is struck by it.

Then Roger is in their midst, a very sunburnt Roger, but just at first his eyes are only upon Dulce, and after a little bit it becomes apparent to everybody that it is Dulce alone he sees; and that she is in fact the proud possessor of all the sight he owns.

He has taken between both his the two little trembling hands she has extended to him, and is pressing them warmly, openly, without the slightest idea of concealing the happiness he feels in being at her side again.

A little happy smile wreathes her lips as she sees this, and with her white fingers she smooths down the gray sleeve of his coat, as if he were a priceless treasure, once lost, but now restored to her again.

I think Dare likes being looked upon as a long-lost priceless treasure, because he does not move, and keeps his eyes still on her as though he would never like to remove them and makes no objection to his sleeve being brushed up the wrong way.

"It seems like a hundred thousand years since you went away," says Dulce, with a little happy sigh, after which every one crowds around him, and he is welcomed with extreme joy into the family circle again. Indeed, the Boodie exhibits symptoms of insanity, and dances round him with a vivacity that a dervish might be proud of.

This is, of course, very delightful, specially to Stephen Gower, who is sitting glooming upon space, and devoured with something he calls disgust, but might be more generally termed the commonest form of jealousy. The others are all crowding round Roger, and are telling him, in different language, but in one breath, how welcome he is.

This universal desire to light mythical tar-barrels in honor of the wanderer's return suggests at last to Mr. Gower the necessity of expressing his delight likewise. Rising, therefore, from his seat, he goes up to Roger, and insists on shaking him cordially by the hand. This proceeding on his part, I am bound to say, is responded to by Roger in a very niggardly manner—a manner that even undergoes no improvement when Mr. Gower expresses his overwhelming satisfaction at seeing him home again.

"We are all more pleased to see you again than we can say," declares Mr. Gower, purposely forgetful of that half-hour in the back-yard, when they had been bent on pommeling each other, and doubtless would have done so but for Sir Mark.

He says this very well indeed, and with quite an overflow of enthusiasm—perhaps rather too great an overflow; because Roger, looking at him out of his dark eyes, decides within himself that this whilom friend of his is now his bitterest enemy, hating him with all the passionate hatred of a jealous heart.

The Boodie is in a state of triumph bordering on distraction.

"*She* had always said he (Roger) would return on New Year's Day; *she* had believed in his promise; *she* had known he would not disappoint," and so on. Every now and then she creeps up to the returned wanderer, to surreptitiously pat his sleeve or his cheek, looking unutterable things all the time. Finally she crowns herself by pressing into his hand a neatly tied little square parcel, with a whisper to the effect that it is his Christmas-box, that she has been keeping for him all the week.

At this Roger takes her up in his arms and kisses her warmly, and tells her he has "something lovely" for her upstairs in his portmanteau, and that after dinner she must come up with him to his room, and they will unpack it together.

This announcement is very near being the cause of bloodshed. Jacky and Pussy, who have been listening intently to every word of it, now glare fiendishly upon the favored Boodie, and sullenly, but with fell determination, make a movement toward her. In another moment all might have been over, and the poor Boodie a mangled corse, but that Roger, coming hurriedly to the rescue, declares there are two *other* "lovely things" in his portmanteau, suitable to the requirements of Pussy and her brother, whereon peace is once more restored.

To Sir Christopher this unexpected return of Roger is an indescribable blessing. His mind at once rises above all things disagreeable; Slyme and his impertinence fade out of remembrance, at least for the present. He sees and thinks of nothing but his handsome lad, who has returned to him safe and sound. There is quite a confusion indeed just at first; every one is talking together, and nobody is dreaming of listening to anybody. All Dulce's heart seems to go out to Roger, as she marks the glad light that brightens his dark eyes as he returns Fabian's greeting.

After a little while every one sobers down, and Roger, who is looking brown and healthy, if a trifle thin, seats himself besides Dulce upon the small ottoman, that, as a rule, is supposed to be only equal to the support of one individual at a time. As neither Dulce nor Roger, however, appear in the very slightest degree uncomfortable upon it, a doubt is at once and forever afterwards thrown upon this supposition. Once only a little hitch occurs that throws a slight damp upon their content. Roger, feeling the Boodie's offering growing

warm within his hands, mechanically opens it, even while carrying on his smiling *tete-a-tete* with Dulce, but soon the smiles vanish! There, on his open palm, lies a very serpent, a noisome reptile, a box of chocolate creams!

A most improper word escapes him. He precipitately drops the box (it is a very pretty box with a lovely young lady on the cover), chocolates and all, behind the ottoman, where they fall softly, being in a high state of decay and damp, and looks gloomily at Dulce. She responds with fervor; she is, indeed, perhaps, a trifle the gloomiest, and for a moment silence is unbroken.

Then they sigh, then they look again, then they try to pretend that nothing has happened to disturb them, and presently so far succeed that conversation once more falls into an easy channel and flows on unbrokenly.

She is smiling up at him in a happy fashion, long unknown to her, and he is looking down at her with such an amount of satisfaction and content in his gaze as cannot be mistaken. On might easily believe he has forgotten the manner of their parting, and is now regarding her as his own particular possession.

When this sort of thing has gone on for five minutes, Gower, feeling he can stand it no longer, draws his breath quickly, and going over to the small ottoman seats himself upon a low chair, quite close to his betrothed; this effort he makes to assert his position, with all the air of a man who is determined to do or die. Her fan is lying on her knee. Taking it up, with a defiant glance at Roger, he opens it, and trifles with it idly, in a sort of proprietary fashion.

Yet even while he does it, his heart is sad within him and filled with a dire foreboding. The thought that he is unwelcome, that his presence at this moment is probably being regarded in the light of an intrusion by these two, so near to him, fills him with bitterness; he is almost afraid to look at Dulce, lest he shall read in her eyes a cold disapprobation of his conduct in thus interrupting her *tete-à-tete*, when to his surprise a little hand is laid upon his arm, and Dulce's voice asks him a question that instantly draws him into the conversation.

She is smiling very kindly at him; more kindly indeed than she has done for many days; she is in such a happy mood, in such wonderfully gay, bright spirits, that all the world seems

good to her, and it becomes necessary to her to impart her joyousness to all around. *Every one* must be happy to-night, she tells herself; and so, as I have said before, she smiles on Gower, and pats him gently on the arm, and raises him at once to the seventh heaven out of the very lowest depths of despair.

The change is so sudden that Stephen naturally loses his head a little. He draws his chair even nearer to the ottoman He determines to outsit Roger. In five minutes—in half an hour, at all events—the fellow will be obliged to go and speak to somebody else, if only for decency's sake. And then there is every chance that the dressing-bell will soon ring. Dulce's extreme delight, so innocently expressed at her cousin's return had certainly given him a severe shock, but *now* there is no reason why he should not remain victor, and keep the prize he had been at such pains to win.

All is going well. Even with Roger freshly returned by her side, she has shown kindness to him, she has smiled upon him with a greater warmth than usual. I daresay she is determined to show her cousin her preference for *him* (Stephen). This thought makes him positively glow with hope and pride. By guarding against any insidious advances on the part of the enemy, by being ever at Dulce's side to interpose between her and any softly worded sentimental converse, he may conquer and drive the foe from off the field.

Not once this evening until the friendly bed-room candlesticks are produced will he quit her side—never until—

In one moment his designs are frustrated. All his plans are laid low. The voice of Julia breaks upon his ear like a death-knell. She, being fully convinced in her own mind that "poor dear Stephen" is feeling himself in the cold, and is, therefore, inconceivably wretched. determines. with most mistaken kindness, to come to the rescue.

"Stephen, *may* I ask you to do something for me?" she says, in her sweetest tones and with her most engaging smile.

"You may," says Mr. Gower, as in duty bound, and in an awful tone.

"Then do come and help me to wind this wool," says Julia, still in her most fetching manner, holding out for his inspection about as much scarlet wool as it would take an hour to wind, doing it at one's utmost speed.

With a murderous expression Stephen crosses the room to where she is sitting—at the very antipodes from where he would be, that is, from Dulce—and drops sullenly into a chair at her side.

"Poor dear fellow, already he is feeling injured and out of spirits," says Julia to herself, regarding him with furtive compassion.

"Beast! she is in a plot against me!" says Mr. Gower to his own soul, feeling he could willingly strangle her with her red wool.

So do we misunderstand the feelings and motives of our best friends in this world.

Dulce and Roger thus left to their own resources, continue to be openly and unrestrainedly happy. Every now and then a laugh from one or other of them comes to the stricken Stephen, sitting on his stool of repentance, winding the endless wool. By and by it becomes worse when no laugh is heard, and when the two upon the ottoman seem to be conversing in a tone that would be a whisper if it dared. To Gower it is already a whisper, and frenzy ensues.

Wild thoughts arise within his breast; something it seems to him must be done, and that *soon*. Shall he throw this vile wool, this scarlet abomination, in Julia's placid face, and with a naughty word defy her to hold him prisoner any longer? Or shall he fling himself bodily upon Roger and exterminate him? Or shall he publicly upbraid Dulce with her perfidy? No; this last is too mild a course, and something tells him would not create the havoc that alone can restore peace to his bosom. Shall he—

Oh, blessed sound, the dressing bell. Now she must tear herself away from this new-found cousin and go up-stairs—doubtless to array herself in her choicest garments for his delectation later on. He grinds his teeth again, as this thought comes to torment him.

Regardless of Julia's cry of horror and remonstrance, he drops the wool and rises to his feet, leaving it a hopeless mass on the carpet. He makes a step in Dulce's direction, but she, too, has got up, and before he can reach her has disappeared through the doorway, and is half-way up the old oak staircase.

He takes her in to dinner, certainly, later on, but finds, on seating himself, that Roger, by some unaccountable chance,

has secured the seat on her other side. He finds out, too, presently, that she is devoting all her conversation to her cousin, and seems curiously inquisitive about his travels. She appears indeed positively athirst for information on this subject; and the soup is as naught, and the fish as sawdust, in the eyes of Mr. Gower.

"You were in Egypt, too? Tell me all about it. I have always so *longed* to hear about Egypt," says Dulce, with soft animation.

"Egypt?" says Roger, with some natural hesitation as to how to begin; Egypt is a big place, and just now seems a long way off. "Well, there is a good deal of it, you know; what do you want to know most?"

"Whether you enjoyed yourself—whether you were happy there?" replies she, promptly. I daresay it isn't quite the answer he had expected, because he looks at her for half a minute or so very intently.

"Happy? That includes such a great deal," he says, at length. "It is a very interesting country beyond doubt, and there are Pyramids, you know; you heard of 'em once or twice, I shouldn't wonder; and there are beggars and robbers, and more sand than I ever saw in my life, and— *No*," with a sudden, almost startling change of tone, "I was *not* happy there, or anywhere else, since last I saw you!"

"Robbers!" says Dulce, hastily, with a rather forced little laugh; "regular brigands, do you mean, going about in hordes, with tunics, and crimson sashes, and daggers. How *could* one be happy with such terrible people turning up at every odd corner? I daresay," trifling nervously with a wine glass, "it would make one often wish to be at home again."

"I often wished to be at home again." Somehow his manner gives her to understand that the gentlemen in crimson sashes had nothing whatever to do with this wish.

"I fancied brigands belonged exclusively to Greece and Italy," says Dulce, still intent upon the wine glass. "Are they very picturesque, and do they really go about dressed in all the colors of the rainbow?"

Plainly Miss Blount has been carefully studying the highly-colored prints in the old school-books, in which the lawless Greeks are depicted as the gayest of the gay.

"They are about the most ill-looking ruffians it has ever been my fate to see," says Mr. Dare, indifferently.

"How disappointing! I don't believe you liked being in Egypt after all," says Dulce, who cannot resist returning to tread once more the dangerous ground.

"I think one place is about as good as another," says Mr. Dare, discontentedly, "and about as bad. One shouldn't expect too much, you know.

"Perhaps it would be as well if one didn't expect anything," says Dulce.

"*Better*, no doubt."

"You take a very discontented view of things; your traveling has made you cynical, I think."

"Not my *traveling?*"

This is almost a challenge, and she accepts it.

"What then?" she asks, a little coldly.

"Shall I tell you?" retorts he, with an unpleasant smile. "Well, no; I will spare you; it would certainly not interest *you*. Let us return to our subject; you are wondering why I am not in raptures about Egypt; I am wondering why I should be."

"No; I was finding fault with you because you gave me the impression that all places on earth are alike indifferent to you."

"Perhaps that is true. I don't defend myself. But I know there was a time when certain scenes were dear to me."

"There *was?*"

"Yes; I've outgrown it, I suppose; or else memory, rendering all things bitter, is to blame. It is our cruelest enemy. I dare say we might all be pretty comfortable forever if we could only 'Quaff the kind Nepenthe, and forget our lost Lenore.'"

"'Ock, 'm?" asks the sedate butler at this emotional moment, in his most prosaic tones.

Dulce starts perceptibly, and says "No," though she means "Yes." Roger starts too, and, being rather absent altogether, mistakes the sedate butler's broken English for good German, and says, "Hockheim?" in a questioning voice; whereupon Dicky Browne, who has overheard him, laughs immoderately and insists upon repeating the little joke to everybody. They all laugh with him, except, indeed, Portia,

who happens to be miles away in thought from them, and does not hear one word of what is being said.

"Portia," says Dicky, presently.

No answer; Portia's soul is still winging its flight to unseen regions.

"Still deaf to my entreaties," says Mr. Browne, eyeing her fixedly. Something in his tone rouses her this time from her day-dreams, and, with a rather absent smile, she turns her face to his. Fabian, who has been listening to one of Mark Gore's rather pronounced opinions upon a subject that doesn't concern us here, looks up at this moment and lets his eyes rest upon her.

"Will you not deign to bestow even one word upon your slave?" asks Dicky, sweetly. "Do. He pines for it. And after all the encouragement, too, you have showered upon me of late, this behavior—this studied avoidance is strange."

"You were asking me—?" begins Portia vaguely, with a little soft laugh.

"'Why art thou silent? Is thy love a plant?'" quotes Mr. Browne, with sentimental reproach. As usual, he attacks his favorite author, and, as usual also, gives to that good man's words a meaning unknown to him.

Portia, raising her head, meets Fabian's eyes regarding her earnestly, and then and there colors hotly; there is no earthly reason why she should change color, yet she does so unmistakably, nay, painfully. She is feeling nervous and unstrung, and—not very well to-night, and even this light mention of the word love has driven all the blood from her heart to her cheeks. A moment ago they were pale as Lenten lilies, now they are dyed as deep as a damask rose.

For a moment only. She draws her breath quickly, full of anger at her own want of self-control, and then the flush fades, and she is even paler than she was before. Again she glances at Fabian, but not again do her eyes meet his. He has seemingly forgotten her very existence and has returned to his discussion with Sir Mark. He is apparently deeply interested, nay, animated, and even as she watches him he laughs aloud, a rare thing for him.

She tells herself that she is glad of this; *very* glad, because it may prove he has not noticed her emotion. Her awkward blush, doubtless, was unseen by him. Yet I think she is piqued at his indifference, because her eyes grow duller and

her lips sadder, and there is a small, but painful, flutter at her heart, that reminds her of the days before she came to Old Court, and that compels her to press her fingers tightly together, under cover of the table-cloth, in a vain effort to subdue it.

Dicky, who had noticed her quick transitions of color, and who feels there is something wrong, without knowing what, and who also understands that he himself, however unwittingly, has been the cause of it, grows annoyed with himself, and, to distract attention, turns to the Boodie, who is generally to be found at his elbow when anything sweet is to be had.

The butler and his attendant are politely requesting the backs of all the heads to try a little jelly, or cream, or so on. This, at the Court, is virtually the children's hour, as Sir Christopher—who adores them—is of opinion that they prefer puddings to fruit, and that, as they should be made free of both, they are to put in an appearance with the first sweet every evening.

The Boodie, whose "vanity" is whipped cream, has just been helped to it, and Dicky, at this moment (that he may give Portia time to recover herself) turning to the golden-haired fairy beside him, adds to her felicity by dropping some crimson jelly into the centre of the cream.

"There now, I have made an island for you," he says.

Julia overhears him, and thinking this a capital opportunity to show off the Boodie's learning, says, proudly:

"Now, darling, tell Dicky what an island really is."

Dicky feels honestly obliged to her for following up his lead, and so breaking the awkward silence that has descended upon him and Portia.

"A tract of land entirely surrounded by water," says the Boodie, promptly, betraying a faint desire to put her hands behind her back."

"Not at all," says Mr. Browne, scornfully; "it is a bit of red jelly entirely surrounded by cream!"

"It is *not*," says the Boodie, with a scorn that puts his in the shade. To be just to the Boodie, she is always eager for the fray. Not a touch of cowardice about her. "How," demands she, pointing to the jelly, with a very superior smile, "how do you think one could live upon *that?*"

"Why not? I don't see how any one could possibly desire anything better to live upon."

"Just fancy Robinson Crusoe on it," says the Boodie, with a derisive smile.

"I could fancy him very fat on it; I could also fancy him considering himself in great luck when he found it, or discovered it. They always discovered islands, didn't they? *I* should like to live on just such an island for an indefinite number of years."

"You are extremely silly," says Miss Beaufort, politely; "you know as well as I do that it wouldn't keep you up."

"Well, not, perhaps, so strongly as a few other things," acknowledges Mr. Browne, gracefully; "but I think it *would* support me for all that,—for a *time*, at least."

"Not for one minute. Why, you couldn't stand on it."

"A prolonged acquaintance with it *alone* might make me totter, I confess," says Mr. Browne. "But yet, if I had enough of it, I think I *could* stand on it very well."

"You could *not*," says the Boodie, indignant at being so continuously contradicted on a point so clear. "If you had ten whole jellies—if you had one as big as this house—you couldn't manage it."

"I really beg your pardon," protests Mr. Browne, with dignity. "It is my belief that I *could* manage it in time. I'm very fond of jelly."

"You would go right through it and come out at the other side," persists the Boodie, nothing daunted.

"Like the Thames Tunnel. How nice!" says Dicky Browne, amiably.

"Well, you can't live on it *now*, anyway," says the Boodie, putting the last bit of the jelly island into her small mouth.

"No, no, indeed," says Dicky, shaking his head with all the appearance of one sunk in the very deepest dejection.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I do perceive here a divided duty."—*Othello.*

JEALOUSY is the keenest, the most selfish, the most poignant of all sufferings. "It is," says Milton, "the injured lover's hell." This monster having now seized upon Stephen,

is holding him in a close embrace and is swiftly crushing within him all hope and peace and joy.

To watch Dulce day after day in her cousin's society, to mark her great eyes grow brighter when he comes, is now more than he can endure. To find himself second where he had been first is intolerable to him, and a shrinking feeling that warns him he is being watched and commented upon by all the members of the Blount household, renders him at times half mad with rage and wounded pride.

Not that Dulce slights him in any way, or is cold to him, or gives him to understand, even indirectly, that she would gladly know her engagement at an end. She is both kind and gentle—much more so than before—but any doubt he had ever entertained about her having a real affection for him has now become a certainty.

He had won her unfairly. He had wrought upon her feelings in an evil hour, when her heart was torn with angry doubts and her self-love grievously hurt; when all her woman's soul was aflame with the thought that she was the unwelcome property of a man who would gladly be rid of her.

Her parting with Roger, and the unexpected emotion he had then betrayed, had opened her eyes in part, and had shown her how she had flung away the thing she desired, to gain —naught. Even now, I think she hardly knows how well she loves her cousin, or how well he loves her, so openly displayed is her pleasure in his society, so glad is the smile that welcomes him whenever he enters the room where she is, or seats himself beside her—which is very often—or when he addresses her, which means whenever he has anything at all to say to anybody.

At first he had fought manfully against his growing fears, but when a week had gone by and he had had it forced upon him that the girl he loved was every day becoming more silent and *distraite* in his presence, and when he had seen how she would gladly have altogether avoided his coming if she could, he lost all heart, and, flinging up his cards, let a bitter revengeful feeling enter and take possession of his heart—where love, alone, before, had held full sway.

If not his—she shall at least never be Roger's. This he swears to himself, with white lips and eyes dangerously bright.

He has her promise, and he will keep her to it. Nothing

shall induce him to release her from it; or if he has to consent to her not fulfilling her engagement with him, it shall be *only* on condition that she will never marry Dare. Even should she come to him with tears in her eyes and on her bended knees to ask him to alter this decision, she will beg in vain. He registers a bitter vow that Roger shall not triumph where he has failed.

He knows Dulce sufficiently well to understand that she will think a good deal of breaking the word she gave him of her own free will, even though she gave it in anger and to her own undoing. He can calculate to a nicety the finer shades of remorse and self-contempt that will possess her when he lays his case in all its nakedness before her. She is a wilful, hot-tempered little thing, but the Blounts for generations have been famed for a strain of honor toward friend and foe that runs in their blood, and is dear to them as their lives. Therefore he knows her word will be as sacred to her as her bond.

To Stephen just at this time the world is a howling wilderness; there is no sun anywhere, and every spring is dry. He has fallen into the habit of coming very seldom to the Court, where he used to be morning, noon, and night, ever since his unlucky engagement; indeed, no one in the house or out of it has seen him since the day before yesterday.

Sitting at home, brooding over his wrongs, with a short and well-blackened pipe in his mouth, he is giving himself up a victim to despair and rage. That he can still love her with even, it seems to him, a deeper intensity than before, is the bitterest drop in his cup. It was all so sudden, so unexpected. He tortures himself now with the false belief that she was *beginning* to love him, that she *might* have loved him had time been given him, and had Egypt held Roger but a few months longer in her foster arms. In a little flash it had all come to him, and now his life is barren, void of interest, and full of ceaseless pain.

> "Bring withered Autumn leaves,
> Call everything that grieves,
> And build a funeral pyre above his head!
> Heap there all golden promise that deceives,
> Beauty that wins the heart, and then bereaves,
> For love is dead.
>
> "Not slowly did he die.
> A meteor from the sky
> Falls not so swiftly as his spirit fled—
> When, with regretful, half-averted eye,
> He gave one little smile, one little sigh,
> And so was sped."

These verses, and such as these, he reads between his doleful musings. It gives him some wretched comfort to believe Dulce had actually some sparks of love for him before her cousin's return. An erroneons belief, as she had never cared for him in that way at all, and at her best moments had only a calm friendship for him. It is my own opinion that even if Roger had never returned she yet would have found an excuse at some time to break off her engagement with Gower, or, at least, to let him understand that she would wish it broken.

To-day is fine, though frosty, and everybody, the children included, are skating on the lake, which is to be found about half a mile from the house at the foot of a "wind-beaten hill." The sun is shining coldly, as though steadily determined to give no heat, and a sullen wind is coming up from the distant shore. "Stern Winter loves a dirge-like sound," and must now, therefore, be happy, as Boreas is asserting himself nobly, both on land and sea.

Some of the *jeunesse doree* of the neighborhood, who have been lunching at the Court, are with the group upon the lake, and are cutting (some of them) the most remarkable figures, in every sense of the word, to their own and everybody else's delight.

Dulce, who is dressed in brown velvet and fur, is gliding gracefully hither and thither with her hand fast locked in Roger's. Julia is making rather an exhibition of herself, and Portia, who skates—as she does everything else—to perfection, but who is easily tired, is just now sitting upon the bank with the devoted Dicky by her side. Sir Mark, coming up to these last two, drops lazily down on the grass at Portia's other side.

"Why don't you skate, Mark?" asks Portia, turning to him.

"Too old," says Gore.

"Nonsense! You are not too old for other things that require far greater exertion. For one example, you will dance all night and never show sign of fatigue."

"I like waltzing."

"Ah! and not skating."

"It hurts when one falls," says Mark, with a yawn; "and why put oneself in a position likely to create stars before one's eyes, and a violent headache at any moment?"

"Inferior drink, if you take enough of it, will do all that sometimes," says Mr. Browne, innocently.

"Will it? I dont know anything about it" (severely). 'You do, I shouldn't wonder; you speak so feelingly."

"If you address me like that again, I shall cry," says Dicky, sadly.

"Why are not you and Portia skating? It is far too cold to sit still on this damp grass."

"I am tired," says Portia, smiling rather languidly. "It sounds very affected, doesn't it? but really I am very easily fatigued. The least little exertion does me up. Town life, I suppose. But I enjoy sitting here and watching the others."

"So do I," says Sir Mark. "It quite warms my heart to see them flitting to and fro over there like a pretty dream."

"What part of your heart?" asks Mr. Browne, with a suppressed chuckle—"the cockles of it?" It is plain he has not yet forgotten his snubbing of a minute since.

Nobody takes any notice of this outrageous speech. It is passed over very properly in the deadliest silence.

"By Jove!" says Sir Mark, presently, "there's Macpherson down again. That's the eighteenth time; I've counted t."

"He can't skate a little screw," says Dicky. "It's a pity to be looking at him. It only raises angry passions in one's breast. He ought to go home and put his head in a bag."

"A well-floured one," responded Sir Mark.

Portia laughs. Her laugh is always the lowest, softest thing imaginable.

"Charitable pair," she says.

"Why, the fellow can't stand," says Mr. Browne, irritably. "And he looks so abominably contented with himself and his deplorable performance. That last time he was merely trying to get from that point there to that," waving his hand in both directions. "Any fool could do it. See, I'll show you." He jumps to his feet, gets on to the ice, essays to do what Captain Macpherson had tried to do, and succeeds in doing exactly what Captain Macpherson *did*. That is to say, he instantly comes a most tremendous cropper right in front of Portia.

Red, certainly, but consumed with laughter at his own defeat, he returns to her side. There is no use in attempting it, nothing earthly could have power to subdue Dicky's spirits. He is quite as delighted at his own discomfiture as if it had happened to somebody else.

"You were right, Dicky," says Sir Mark, when he can speak, "*Any* fool could do it. *You* did it."

"I did," says Dicky, roaring with laughter; "with a vengeance. Never mind—

> 'Only the actions of the just
> Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.'"

"I hardly think I follow you," says Sir Mark. "Where's the dust, Dicky, and where's the just? I can't see either of them."

"My dear fellow, never be literal; nothing is so—so boring," says Mr. Browne, with conviction. "I'm," striking his chest, "the dust, and there," pointing to the lake, "is the just, and—no, by-the-by, that don't sound right—I mean—"

"Oh, never mind it," says Sir Mark.

Dulce and Roger having skated by this time past all the others, and safely over a rather shaky part of the ice that leaves them at the very farthest corner of the lake, stop somewhat out of breath and look at each other triumphantly.

Dulce is looking, if possible, more bonny than usual. Her blood is aglow, and tingling with the excitement of her late exertion; her hair, without actually having come undone, is certainly under less control than it was an hour ago, and is glinting and changing from auburn to brown, and from brown to a warm yellow, beneath the sad kisses of the Wintry sun. One or two riotous locks have escaped from under her otter-skin cap and are straying lovingly across her fair forehead, suggesting an idea of coquetry in the sweet eyes below shaded by their long dark lashes.

> "Your eyes are stars of morning,
> Your lips are crimson flowers,"

says Roger softly, as they still stand hand in hand. He is looking at her intently, with a new meaning in his glance as he says this.

"What a pretty song that is!" says Miss Blount, carelessly. "I like it better almost every time I hear it."

"It was you made me think of it now," says Roger; and then they seat themselves upon a huge stone near the brink, that looks as if it was put there on purpose for them.

"Where is Gower?" asks Roger, at length, somewhat abruptly.

"Yes—where?" returns she, in a tone suggestive of the idea that now for the first time she had missed him. She says it quite naturally and without changing color. The fact is it really *is* the first time she has thought of him to-day, but I regret to say Roger firmly believes she is acting, and that she is doing it uncommonly well.

"He hasn't been at the Court since yesterday—has he?" he asks, somewhat impatiently.

"N—o. But I dare say he will turn up by-and-by. Why?" with a quick glance at him from under her heavy lashes. "Do you want him?"

"Certainly not. *I* don't want him," said Roger, with exceeding emphasis upon the pronoun.

"Then I don't know anybody else who does," finishes Dulce, biting her lips.

"She is regularly piqued because the fellow hasn't turned up—a lover's quarrel, I suppose," says Mr. Dare, savagely, to himself, reading wrongly that petulant movement of her lips.

"You do!" he says. To be just to him, he is, and always, I think, will be, a terribly outspoken young man.

"*I* do?"

"Yes; you looked decidedly cut up just now when I spoke of his not being here since yesterday."

"You are absurdly mistaken," declares Miss Blount, with dignity. "It is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me whether he comes or goes." (Oh, if he could only know how true this is!)

"Even more piqued than I supposed," concludes Roger, inwardly.

"However, I have no doubt we shall see him this evening," goes on Dulce, calmly.

"*That* will be a comfort to you, at all events," murmurs he, gloomily.

Silence follows this. Nothing is heard save the distant laughter of the skaters at the other end of the lake and the scraping noise of their feet. The storm is rising steadily in the hills above, but as yet has not descended on the quiet valley. The gaunt trees are swaying and bending ominously, and through them one catches glimpses of the angry sky above, across which clouds are scudding tempestuously. The dull sun has vanished: all is gray and cheerless. The roar

of the breakers upon the rock-bound coast comes up from afar: while up there upon the wooded hill the

> "Wind, that grand old harper, smites
> His thunder-harp of pines."

"Perhaps we had better return to the others," says Dulce, coldly, making a movement as though to rise.

"Now I have offended you," exclaims Roger, miserably, catching her hand, and drawing her down to the stone beside him again. "I don't know what's the matter with me; I only know I am as wretched as ever I can be. Forgive me, if you can."

He pulls his hat over his eyes and sighs deeply. At this moment his whole appearance is so decidedly suicidal that no true woman could look at him unmoved. Miss Blount is a true woman; her *hauteur* of a moment since vanishes like snow, and compassion takes its place.

"What is making you wretched?" she asks, in a tone meant to be severe, but which is only friendly.

"When I remember what a fool I have been," begins Roger, rather as if he is following out a train of thought than answering her.

"Oh, no; not that," says Dulce, very kindly; "don't call yourself that."

"There is no other name for me," persists Roger, with increasing melancholy. "Of course, at *that time*—I knew you didn't particularly care for me, but," disconsolately, "it never occured to me you might care for any other fellow!"

"I didn't!" said Miss Blount, suddenly; and then, as suddenly, she remembers everything, her engagement to Stephen, her horror of that engagement, all that her last words have admitted, and, growing as red as a rose, she seeks to hide her confusion by burying her rounded chin as deep as she can in her soft furs. At the same time she lowers her lids over her shamed eyes and gazes at her boots as if she never saw small twos before.

Roger, I need hardly say, is too much of a gentleman to take any notice of this impulsive admission on her part. Besides, he hardly gets as much consolation out of it as he should. He is in that stage when to pile up the agony becomes a melancholy satisfaction, and when the possibility of comfort in any form takes the shape of a deliberate insult.

"Did you ever once think of me all the time I was away?" he asks, presently, in a low tone that distinctly gives her to understand he believes she didn't. That in fact he would—in his present frame of mind—*rather* believe she didn't. His voice is growing absolutely tragic, and, altogether, he is as deplorably unhappy as any young woman could desire.

"I wish," says poor Dulce, her voice quivering, "that you would not speak to me like this now, or—or that you had spoken like it long ago!"

"I wish I had, with all my soul," says Roger, fervently. "However," with a heavy sigh, "you are engaged to *him* now, you know, so I suppose there is no use in talking about it."

"If I do know it, why tell me again about it?" says Dulce, reproachfully, her eyes full of tears. "Just like you to remind me—of—my *misfortune!*"

It is out. She has been dying to tell him for the last half hour of this trouble that has been pressing upon her for months, of this most distasteful engagement, and now that she has told him, though frightened, yet she would hardly recall her words. Her lashes linger on her cheeks, and she looks very much as if she would like to cry but for the disgrace of the thing.

"Your misfortune!" repeats Roger, in a strange tone "Are you not happy, then?"

He has risen to his feet in his surprise and agitation, and is looking down on her as she sits trembling before him, her hands tightly clasped together.

"Do you mean to tell me he is not good to you?" asks Roger, seeing she either cannot or will not speak.

"He is too good to me; you must not think that," exclaims she, earnestly. "It is only—that I don't care about his goodness—I don't care," desperately, "for anything connected with him."

"You have made a second mistake, then?"

"Not a *second*," in a very low tone.

"Then let us say, you have again changed your mind?"

"No."

"You liked him once?" impatiently.

"No."

"You might as well say you *did* like me," says Roger, with angry warmth; "and I know I was actually abhorrent in your sight."

"No, no, *no*," says Dulce for the third time, in a tone so low now that he can hardly hear it; yet he does.

"Dulce! do you know what you are implying?" asks he, in deep agitation. "It is one of two things now: either that you never liked Stephen, and always lov—liked me, or else you are trying to make a fool of me for the second time. Which is it?"

To this Miss Blount declines to make any reply.

"I won't leave this spot to-day until you answer me," says Roger, fell determination on his brow; "Which—is—it?"

"I'm sure, at least, that I never liked Stephen in *that* way," confesses she, faintly.

"And you did like me?"

Silence again.

"Then," says Mr. Dare, wrathfully, "for the sake of a mere whim, a caprice, you flung me over and condemned me to months of misery? Did you know what you were doing? Did *you* feel unhappy? I hope to goodness you *did*," says Roger, indignantly; "if you endured even one quarter of what I have suffered, it would be punishment sufficient for you."

"Had you nothing to do with it?" asks she, nervously.

"No; it was entirely your own fault," replies he, hastily. Whereupon she very properly bursts into tears.

"Every woman," says some one, "is in the wrong till she cries; then, instantly, she is in the right."

So it is with Dulce, No sooner does Roger see "her tears down fa'" than, metaphorically speaking, he is on his knees before her. I am sure but for the people on the lake, who might find an unpleasant amount of amusement in the tableau, he would have done so literally.

"Don't do that," he entreats, earnestly. "Don't Dulce. I have behaved abominably to you. It was *not* your fault; it was all mine. But for my detestable temper—"

"And the chocolate creams," puts in Dulce, sobbing.

"It would never have occurred. Forgive me," implores he, distractedly, seeing her tears are rather on the increase than otherwise. "I must be a brute to speak to you as I have done."

"I won't contradict you," says Miss Blount, politely, still sobbing. There is plainly a great deal of indignation mingled with her grief. To say it was all *her* fault, indeed, when he knows.

"Don't cry any more," says Roger, coaxingly, trying to draw her hands down from her eyes; "don't, now, you have got to go back to the others, you know, and they will be wondering what is the matter with you. They will think you had a bad fall."

This rouses her; she wipes her eyes hastily and looks up.

"How shall I explain to them?" she asks, anxiously.

"We won't explain at all. Let me take off your skates, and we will walk up and down here until your eyes are all right again. Why, really," stooping to look at them, "they are by no means bad; they will be as good as ever in five minutes."

Inexpressibly consoled, she lets him take off her skates, and commences a gentle promenade with him up and down the brown and stunted grass that lies upon the path.

"There was a time," says Roger, after a pause, "when I might have dared to kiss away your tears, but I suppose that time is gone forever."

"I suppose so," dismally; tears are still wetting the sweet eyes she turns up to his.

"Dulce! let me understand you," says Roger, gravely. "You are quite sure you don't care for him?"

"Quite," says Dulce, without a second's hesitation.

"Then ask him to give you up—to release you from your promise," says Roger, brightly.

"I—I'd be afraid," replies Miss Blount, drooping her head.

"Nonsense!" says Roger (of course it is not *he* who has to do it). "Why should you feel nervous about a thing like that? You don't want to marry him, therefore say so. Nothing can be simpler."

"It doesn't sound simple to me," says Dulce, dolefully.

Just at this moment a young man, dressed in gray, emerges from the group of alders that line the south edge of the lake, very near to where Dulce and Roger are standing. He is so situated that he is still concealed from view, though quite near enough to the cousins to hear what they are saying. The last two sentences having fallen on his ears, he stands as if spell-bound, and waits eagerly for what may come next.

"He can't possibly want to marry you if you don't want to marry him," says Roger, logically, "and you *don't?*" a little doubtfully still.

"I don't, indeed," says Dulce, with a sad sigh and a shake of her auburn head.

At this the young man in the gray suit, with a bitter curse, turns away, and, retracing his steps, gets to the other side of the lake without being seen by either Dulce or his companion.

Here he declines to stay or converse with anyone. Passing by Portia and the two men who are still attending to her, he bows slightly, and pretends not to hear Dicky's voice as it, calls to him to stop.

"He is like that contemptible idiot who went round with the 'banner with the strange device,'" says Dicky Browne, looking after him; "nothing will stop him."

"What's up with him now?" asks Sir Mark, squeezing his glass into his eye, the better to watch Stephen's figure, as it hurriedly disappears.

"I expect he has eaten something that has disagreed with him," says Dicky, cheerfully.

"Well, really, he looked like it," says Gore. "A more vinegary aspect it has seldom been my lot to gaze upon, for which I acknowledge my gratitude. My dear Portia, unless you intend to go in for rheumatics before your time, you will get up from that damp grass and come home with me."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break."
—*In Memoriam.*

"DID *he*—I mean did *you*—ever—; Dulce, will you be very angry with me if I ask you a question?"

"No. But I hope it won't be a disagreeable one," says Dulce, glancing at him cautiously.

"That is just as you may look at it," says Roger. "But I suppose I may say it—after all, we are like brother and sister are we not?"

"Ye-es. *Quite* like brother and sister," says Dulce, but somehow this thought seems to give her no pleasure.

"Only we are *not*, you know," puts in Roger, rather hastily,

"No, of course we are *not*," replies she, with equal haste.

"Well, then, look here—"

But even now that he has got so far, he hesitates again, looks earnestly at her, and pulls his mustache uncertainly, as if half afraid to go any further.

It is the afternoon of the next day, and as the sun has come out in great force, and the mildness of the day almost resembles Spring in its earliest stages, they are all about the place, strolling hither and thither, whithersoever pleasant fancy guides them.

Roger and Dulce, after lingering for some time in the Winter garden looking at the snowdrops, and such poor foster-babes as have thrust their pallid faces above the warm earth, that, like a cruel stepmother, has driven them too early from her breast, have moved slowly onwards until they find themselves beside a fountain that used to be a favorite haunt of theirs long ago.

Dulce, seating herself upon the stone-work that surrounds it, though the water is too chilly to be pleasant, still toys lightly with it with her idle fingers, just tipping it coquettishly now and then, with her eyes bent thoughtfully upon as it sways calmly to and fro beneath the touch of the cold wind that passes over it.

Just now she raises her eyes and fixes them inquiringly on Roger.

"Go on," she says, quietly. "You were surely going to ask me something. Are you afraid of me?"

"A little, I confess."

"You need not." She is still looking at him very earnestly.

"Well, then," says Roger, as though nerving himself for a struggle—"tell me this." He leaves where he is standing and comes closer to her. "Did—did you ever kiss Gower?"

"Never—*never!*" answers Dulce, growing quite pale.

"I have no right to ask it, I know that," says Roger. "But," desperately, "did he ever kiss *you?*"

"Never, indeed."

"Honor bright?"

"Honor bright."

A long silence. Miss Blount's fingers are quite deep in the water now, and I think she does not even feel the cold of it.

"He has been engaged to you for three months and more and never wanted to kiss you!" exclaims Roger at last, in a tone expressive of great amazement and greater contempt.

"I don't think I said quite *that*," returns she, coloring faintly.

"Then"—eagerly—"it was *you* prevented him!"

"I don't care much about that sort of thing," says Dulce, with a little shrug.

"Don't you? Then I don't believe you care a button about *him*," replies he, with glad conviction.

"That is mere surmise on your part. Different people"—vaguely—"are different. I don't believe if I had any affection for a person that a mere formal act like kissing would increase the feeling."

"Oh, wouldn't it, though!" says Mr. Dare—"that's all you know about it! You just try it, that's all."

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind," says Dulce, with much indignation, and some natural disappointment—that *he* should recommend such a course to her!

"I didn't mean that you should—should—I didn't, in the least, that you should be a bit civiller to Gower, or any one, than you are *now*," says Roger, hastily, greatly shocked at the construction she has put upon his words, and rather puzzled for language in which to explain himself more clearly. At this the cloud disappears from her pretty face, and she bestows a smile upon him that at once restores him to equanimity.

"I can't say I think much of Gower as a lover," he says, after a while, a touch of scorn in his voice. "To be engaged to you for three whole months, and never once to kiss you."

"*You* were engaged to me for three whole *years*," replies his cousin, quietly, yet with a flash from her deep gray eyes that means much, "and I cannot remember that you ever cared to kiss me *at all*."

This is a home-thrust.

"I don't know what was the matter with me then," he says, making no attempt at denial, though there certainly were one or two occasions he might have referred to; "I don't believe"—in a low tone—"I ever knew I was fond of you until—until I lost you."

"Oh, you must not talk to me like this!" entreats she, the

tears coming into her eyes and trembling on her long lashes.

"I suppose not. But this new-found knowledge is hard to suppress; why *did* I not discover it all sooner?"

"Better late than never," says Dulce, with a poor attempt at lightness and a rather artificial little laugh, meant to conceal the sorrow that is consuming her. "I think you ought to feel gladness in the thought that you know it at last. Knowledge is power, isn't it?"

"I can feel only sorrow," says Roger, very sadly. "And I have no power."

Dulce's wretched fingers are getting absolutely benumbed in the cold water, yet she seems to feel nothing. Roger, however, stooping over her, lifts the silly little hand and dries it very tenderly, and holds it fast between both his own; doubtless only with the intention of restoring some heat to it. It is quite amazing the length of time it takes to do this.

"Dulce!"

"Well?" She has not looked at him even once during the last five minutes.

"If you are unhappy in your present engagement—and I think you are—why not break with Gower? I spoke to you of this yesterday, and I say the same thing to-day. You are doing both him and yourself an injustice in letting it go on any longer."

"I don't know what to say to him."

"Then get some one else to say it. Fabian, or Uncle Christopher."

"Oh, *no!*" says Dulce, with a true sense of delicacy. "If it is to be done at all I shall do it myself."

"Then do it. Promise me if you get the opportunity you will say something to him about it."

"I promise," says Dulce, very faintly. Then she withdraws the hand from his, and without another word, not even a hint at what the gaining of her freedom may mean to either—or rather both—of them, they go slowly back to the garden, where they meet all the others sitting in a group upon a huge circular rustic seat beneath a branching evergreen; all, that is, except Fabian, who of late has become more and more solitary in his habits.

As Stephen has not put in an appearance at the Court now for fully two days, speculation is rife as to what has become of him.

"It is the oddest thing I ever knew," Julia is saying, as the cousins come up to the rustic-seat.

"What is it?" asks Roger, idly.

"Stephen's defection. He used to be as true as the morning post, and now—I hope he hasn't made away with himself," says Dicky Browne.

"He has had since this time yesterday to do it," says Sir Mark. "I wonder if it takes long to cut one's throat."

"It entirely depends on whether you have sharpened your razor sufficiently, and if you know *how* to sharpen it. I should think a fellow devoid of hirsute adornment would take a good while to it," returns Mr. Browne, with all the air of one who knows. "He wouldn't be up to it, you know. But our late lamented Stephen was all right. He shaved regular."

"He was at the lake yesterday," says Portia, He came up to us from the southern end of it."

At this both Dulce and Roger start, and the former changes color visibly.

"I really wonder *where* he can be," says Julia.

"So do I," murmurs Dulce, faintly, but distinctly, feeling she is in duty bound to say something. "Stephen never used to miss a day."

"Here I am, if you want me," says Stephen, coming leisurely up to them from between the laurels. "I thought I heard somebody mention my name."

He is looking pale and haggard, and altogether unlike the languid, unemotional Stephen of a month ago. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his mouth looks strangely compressed, and full of an unpleasant amount of determination.

"I mentioned it," says Dulce. She is compelled to say this, because he has fixed his eyes upon her, and plainly everybody expects her to reply to him.

"Did you want me?" asks he, casting a scrutinizing glance upon her. So absorbed is he in his contemplation of her that he has positively forgotten the fact that he has omitted to bid any one a "fair good-morrow."

"I was certainly wondering where you were," says Dulce, evasively. She is frightened and subdued—she scarcely knows why. There is something peculiar in his manner that overawes her.

"It was very good of you to remember my existence Then you were only wondering at my absence. You did not want me?"

Dulce makes no reply. She would have given anything to be able to make some civil, commonplace rejoinder, but at this moment her wits cruelly desert her.

"I see. Never mind," says Stephen. "Well, even if you don't want me, I do want *you*—you will come with me as far as the Beeches?"

His tone is more a command than a question. Hearing it, Roger moves involuntarily a step forward, that brings him nearer to Dulce. He even puts out his hand as though to lay it upon her arm, when Stephen, by a gesture, checks him.

"Don't be alarmed," he says, with a low, sneering laugh, every vestige of color gone from his face. "I shall do her no harm. I shan't murder her, I give you my word. Be comforted, she will be quite as safe with me as she would even be with—*you*." He laughs again, dismisses Roger from his thoughts by an indescribable motion of his hand, and once more concentrates his attention upon the girl near him, who, with lowered eyes and a pale, distressed face, is waiting unwillingly for what he may say next.

All this is so unusual, and really, every one is so full of wonder at Stephen's extraordinary conduct, that up to this none of the spectators have said one word. At this juncture, however, Sir Mark clears his throat as if to say something, and, coming forward, would probably have tried the effect of a conciliatory speech, but that Stephen, turning abruptly away from them, takes Dulce's hand in his, and leads her in silence and with a brow dark as Erebus, up the gravelled path, and past the chilly fountain, and thus out of sight.

It is as though some terrible ogre from out of a fairy tale had descended upon them and plucked their fairest damsel from their midst, to incarcerate her in a 'donjon keep" and probably eat her by and by, when she is considered fit to kill.

"Do—*do* you think he has gone mad?" asked Julia, with clasped hands and tearful eyes.

"My dear Mark, I think something ought to be done,—some one ought to go after her," says Portia, nervously. "He really looked quite dreadful."

"I'll go," says Roger, angrily.

"No, you won't," says Sir Mark, catching hold of him. "Let them have it out,—it is far the best thing. And if she gets a regular, right-down, uncommonly good scolding, as I hope she will"—viciously,—"I can only say she richly deserves it."

"I can only say I don't know whether I am standing on my head or on my heels," says Mr. Browne, drawing a long breath; "I feel cheap. Any one might have me now for little or nothing—quite a bargain."

"I don't think you'd be a bargain at any price," says Sir Mark; but this touching tribute to his inestimable qualities is passed over by Mr. Browne in a silence that is almost sublime.

"To think Stephen could look like that!" he goes on, as evenly as if Sir Mark had never spoken. "Why, Irving is a fool to him. Tragedy is plainly his *forte*. Really, one never knows of what these æsthetic-looking people are capable. He looked murderous."

At this awful word the children—who have been silent and most attentive spectators of the late scene, and who have been enchanted with it—turn quite pale, and whisper together in a subdued fashion. When the whispering has reached a certain point, the Boodie gives Jacky an encouraging push, whereupon that young hero darts away from her side like an arrow from a bow, and disappears swiftly round the corner.

Meanwhile, having arrived at the Beeches, a rather remote part of the ground, beautiful in Summer because of the luxuriant foliage of the trees, but now bleak and bare beneath the rough touch of Winter, Stephen stops short and faces his companion steadily. His glance is stern and unforgiving; his whole bearing relentless and forbidding.

To say Miss Blount is feeling nervous would be saying very little. She is looking crushed in anticipation by the weight of the thunderbolt she *knows* is about to fall. Presently it descends, and once down, she acknowledges to herself it was only a shock after all, worse in the fancy than in the reality; as are most of our daily fears.

"So you wish our engagement at an end?" says Stephen, quite calmly, in a tone that might almost be termed mechanical.

He waits remorselessly for an answer.

"I—you—I didn't tell you so," stammers Dulce.

"No prevarications, please. There has been quite enough deception of late." Dulce looks at him curiously. "Let us adhere to the plain truth now at least. This is how the case stands. You never loved me; and now your cousin has returned you find you do love him; that all your former professions of hatred toward him were just so much air—or, let us say, so much wounded vanity. You would be released from me. You would gladly forget I ever played even a small part in the drama of your life. Is not all this true?"

For the second time this afternoon speech deserts Dulce. She grows very white, but answer she has none.

I understand your silence to mean yes," goes on Stephen, in the same monotonous tone he had just used, out of which every particle of feeling has been absolutely banished. "It would, let me say, have saved you much discomfort, and your cousin some useless traveling, if you had discovered your passion for him sooner." At this Dulce draws her breath quickly, and throws up her head with a haughty gesture. Very few women like being *told* they entertain a passion for a man, no matter how devotedly they adore him.

Mr. Gower, taking no notice of her silent protest, goes on slowly.

"What your weakness and foolish pride have cost *me*," he says, "goes for nothing."

There is something in his face now that makes Dulce sorry for him. It is a want of hope. His eyes, too, look sunk and wearied as if from continued want of sleep.

"If by my reprehensible pride and weakness, of which you justly accuse me, I have caused you pain—" she begins tremulously, but he stops her at once.

"That will do," he says, coldly. "Your nature is incapable of comprehending all you have done. We will not discuss that subject. I have not brought you here to talk of myself, but of you. Let us confine ourselves to the business that has brought me to-day—for the last time, I hope—to the Court."

His tone, which is extremely masterful, rouses Dulce to anger.

"There is one thing I *will* say," she exclaims, lifting her eyes fairly to his. "But for *you* and your false sympathy, and your carefully chosen and most insidious words that

fanned the flame of my unjust wrath against him, Roger and I would never have been separated."

"You can believe what you like about that," says Gower, indifferently, unmoved by her vehement outburst. "Believe anything that will make your conduct look more creditable to you, anything that will make you more comfortable in your mind—if you *can*. But as I have no wish to detain you here longer than is strictly necessary, and as I am sure you have no wish to be detained, let us not waste time in recriminations, but come at once to the point."

"What point? I do not understand you," says Dulce, coldly.

"Yesterday, when passing by the southern end of the lake, hidden by some shrubs, I came upon you and your cousin unawares, and heard you distinctly tell him (what I must be, indeed, a dullard, not to have known before) that you did not love me. This was the substance of what you said, but your tone conveyed far more. It led me to believe you held me in positive detestation."

"Oh! You were eavesdropping," says Dulce, indignantly.

Stephen smiles contemptuously.

"No, I was not," he says, calmly. He takes great comfort to his soul in the remembrance that he might have heard much more that was not intended for his ears had he stayed in his place of concealment yesterday, which he had not. "Accident brought me to that part of the lake, and brought, too, your words to my ears. When I heard them I remembered many trivial things, that at the moment of their occurrence had seemed as naught. But now my eyes are opened. I am no longer blind. I have brought you here to tell you I will give you back your promise to marry me, your *freedom*"—with a sudden bitterness, as suddenly suppressed—"on *one* condition."

"And that?" breathlessly.

"Is, that you will never marry Roger without my consent."

The chance of regaining her liberty is so sweet to Dulce at this first moment that it chases from her all other considerations. Oh, to be free again! In vain she strives to hide her gladness. It will *not* be hidden. Her eyes gleam; her lips get back their color; there is such an abandonment of joy and exultation in her face that the man at her side—the man who is now resigning all that makes life sweet to him—

feels his heart grow mad with bitter hatred of her, himself, and all the world as he watches her with miserable eyes. And he—poor fool!—had once hoped he might win the priceless treasure of this girl's love! No words could convey the contempt and scorn with which he regards himself.

"Do not try to restrain your relief," he says, in a hoarse, unnatural tone, seeing she has turned her head a little aside, as though to avoid his searching gaze. "You know the condition I impose—you are prepared to abide by it?"

Dulce hesitates. "Later on he will forget all this, and give his consent to my marrying—any one," she thinks, hurriedly. in spite of the other voice within her, that bids her beware. Then out loud she says, quietly:

"Yes."

Even if he *should* prove unrelenting, she tells herself, it will be better to be an old maid than an unloving wife. She will be rid of this hateful entanglement that has been embittering her life for months, and—and, of course, he *won't* keep her to this absurd arrangement after a while.

"You swear it?"

"I swear it," says Dulce, answering as one might in a dream. Hers is a dream, happy to recklessness, in which she is fast losing herself.

"It is an oath," he says again, as if to give her a last chance to escape.

"It is," replies she, softly, still wrapt in her dream of freedom. She may now love Roger without any shadow coming between them, and—ah! how divine a world it is!—he may perhaps love her too!

"Remember," says Gower, sternly, letting each word drop from him as if with the settled intention of imprinting or burning them upon her brain, "I shall never relent about this. You have given me your solemn oath, and—I shall *keep you to it!* I shall never absolve you from it, as I have absolved you from your first promise to-day. Never. Do not hope for that. Should you live to be a hundred years old, you cannot marry your cousin without my consent, and that I shall never give. You quite understand?"

"Quite." But her tone has grown faint and uncertain. What has she done? Something in his words, his manner, has at last awakened her from the happy dream in which she was reveling.

"Now you can return to your old lover," says Stephen, with an indescribably bitter laugh, "and be happy. For your deeper satisfaction, too, let me tell you that for the future you shall see very little of me."

"You are going abroad?" asks she, very timidly, in her heart devoutly hoping that this may be the reading of his last words.

"No; I shall stay here. But the Court I shall trouble with my presence seldom. I don't know," exclaims he, for the first time losing his wonderful self-control and speaking querulously, "what is the matter with me. Energy has deserted me with all the rest. You have broken my heart, I suppose, and that explains everything. There, go," turning abruptly away from her; "your being where I can see you only makes matters worse."

Some impulse prompts Dulce to go up to him and lay her hand gently on his arm.

"Stephen," she says, in a low tone, "if I have caused you any unhappiness forgive me now."

"Forgive you?" exclaims he, so fiercely that she recoils from him in absolute terror.

Lifting her fingers from his arm as though they burn him, he flings them passionately away, and, plunging into the short thick underwood, is soon lost to sight.

Dulce. pale and frightened, returns by the path by which she had come, but not to those she had left. She is in no humor now for questions or curious looks; gaining the house without encountering any one, she runs up-stairs, and seeks refuge in her own room.

But if she doesn't return to gratify the curiosity of the puzzled group on the rustic-seat, somebody else does.

Jacky, panting, dishevelled, out of breath with quick running rushes up to them, and precipitates himself upon his mother.

"It's all right," he cries, triumphantly. "He didn't do a bit to her. I watched him all the time and he never *touched* her."

"Who? What?" demands the bewildered Julia. But Jacky disdains explanations.

"He only talked, and talked, and talked," he goes on, fluently; "and he said she did awful things to him. And he made her swear at him—and—and"

"*What?*" says Sir Mark.

"It's impossible to know anybody," sighs Dicky Browne, regretfully, shaking his head at this fresh instance of the frailty of humanity. "Who could have believed Dulce capable of using bad language? I hope her school-children and her Sunday class won't hear it, poor little things. It would shake their faith forever."

"How do you know he is talking of Dulce?" says Julia, impatiently. "Jacky, how *dare* you say dear Dulce swore at any one?"

"He *made* her," says Jacky.

"He must have behaved awfully bad to her," says Dicky, gravely.

"He said to her to swear, and she did it at once," continues Jacky, still greatly excited.

"*Con amore*," puts in Mr. Browne.

"And he scolded her very badly," goes on Jacky, at which Roger frowns angrily; "and he said she broke something belonging to him, but I couldn't hear what; and then he told her to go away, and when she was going she touched his arm, and he pushed her away awfully roughly, but he didn't try to *murder* her at all."

"What on earth is the boy saying?" says Julia, perplexed in the extreme, "Who didn't try to murder who?"

"I'm telling you about Dulce and Stephen," says Jacky, in an aggrieved tone, though still ready to burst with importance. "When he took her away from this, I followed 'm; I kept my eyes on 'm. Dicky said Stephen looked murderous; so I went to see if I could help her. But I suppose he got sorry, because he let her off. She is all right; there isn't a *scratch* on her."

Sir Mark and Dicky were consumed with laughter. But Roger, taking the little champion in his arms, kisses him with all his heart.

CHAPTER XXV.

"For aught that ever I could read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth."
—*Midsummer Night's Dream.*

When dinner comes Dulce is wonderfully silent. That is the misfortune of being a rather talkative person, when you want to be silent you can't, without attracting universal attention. Every one now stares at Dulce secretly, and speculates about what Stephen may, or may not, have said to her.

She says yes and no quite correctly to everything, but nothing more, and seems to find no comfort in her dinner—which is rather a good one. This last sign of depression appears to Dicky Browne a very serious one, and he watches her with the gloomiest doubts as he sees dish after dish offered her, only to be rejected.

This strange fit of silence, however, is plainly not to be put down to ill temper. She is kindly, nay, even affectionate, in her manner to all around, except, indeed, to Roger, whom she openly avoids, and whose repeated attempts at conversation she returns with her eyes on the table-cloth, and a general air about her of saying anything she *does* say to him under protest.

To Roger this changed demeanor is maddening; from it he instantly draws the very blackest conclusions; and, in fact, so impressed is he by it that later on, in the drawing-room, when he finds his tenderest glances and softest advances still met with coldness and resistance, and when his solitary effort at explanation is nervously, but remorselessly, repulsed, he caves in altogether, and, quitting the drawing-room, makes his way to the deserted library, where, with a view to effacing himself for the remainder of the evening, he flings himself into an arm-chair, and gives himself up a prey to evil forebodings.

Thus a quarter of an hour goes by, when the door of the

library is opened by Dulce. Roger, sitting with his back to it, does not see her enter, or, indeed, heed her entrance, so wrapt is he in his unhappy musings. Not until she has lightly and timidly touched his shoulder does he start, and, looking round, become aware of her presence.

"It is I," she says, in a very sweet little voice, that brings Roger to his feet and the end of his musings in no time.

"Dulce! What has happened?" he asks, anxiously, alluding to her late strange behavior. "Why won't you speak to me?"

"I don't know," says Dulce, faintly, hanging her head.

"What can I have done? Ever since you went away with Stephen, down to the Beeches to-day, your manner toward me has been utterly changed. Don't—*don't* say you have been persuaded by him to name your wedding day!" He speaks excitedly, as one might who is at last giving words to a fear that has been haunting him for long.

"So far from it," says Miss Blount, with slow solemnity, "that he sought an opportunity to-day to formally release me from my promise to him!"

"He has released you?" Words are too poor to express Roger's profound astonishment.

"Yes; on one condition."

"A condition! What a Jew! Yes; well, go on—?"

"I *can't* go on," says Dulce, growing crimson. "I can't, *indeed*," putting up her hands as she sees him about to protest; "it is of no use asking me. I neither can or will tell you about that condition, *ever*."

"Give me even a *hint*," says Roger, coaxingly.

"No, *no*, NO! The rack wouldn't make me tell it," returns she, with a stern shake of her red-brown head, but with very pathetic eyes.

"But what *can* it be," exclaims Roger, fairly puzzled.

"*That* I shall go to my grave without divulging," replies she, heroically.

"Well, no matter," says Roger, after a minute's reflection, resolved to take things philosophically. "You are free, that is the great point. And now—*now*, Dulce, you will marry me?"

At this Miss Blount grows visibly affected (as they say of ladies in the dock), and dropping into the nearest chair, lets her hands fall loosely clasped upon her knees, and so remains, the very picture of woe.

"I can't do that, either," she says at last, without raising her afflicted lids.

"But why?" impatiently. "What is to prevent you?—unless, indeed," suspiciously, "you really don't care about it."

"It isn't that, indeed," says Dulce, earnestly, letting her eyes, suffused with tears, meet his for a moment.

"Then *what* is it? You say he has released you, and that you have therefore regained your liberty, and yet—yet—Dulce, *do* be rational and give me an explanation. At least say why you will not be my wife."

"If I told that I should tell you the condition, too," says poor Dulce, in a stifled tone, feeling sorely put to it, "and *nothing* would induce me to do that. I told you before I wouldn't."

"You needn't," says Roger, softly. "I see it now. And anything more sneaking— So he has given you your liberty, but has taken good care you sha'n't be happy in it. I never heard of a lower transaction. I—"

"Oh! how did you find it out?" exclaims Dulce, blushing again generously.

"I don't know," replies he, most untruthfully, "I guessed it, I think; it was so like him. You—did you agree to his condition, Dulce?"

"Yes," says Dulce.

"You gave him your word?"

"Yes."

"Then he'll keep you to it, be sure of that. What a pity you did not take time to consider what you would do."

"I considered *this* quite quickly," says Dulce: "I said to myself that *nothing* could be worse than marrying a man I did not love."

"Yes, yes, of course," says Roger, warmly. "Nothing could be worse than marrying Gower."

"And then I thought that perhaps he might relent; and then, besides—I didn't know what to do, because," here two large tears fall down her cheeks and break upon her clasped hands, "because, you see, *you* had not asked me to marry you, and I thought that perhaps you never might ask me, and that so my promise meant very little."

"How could you have thought that?" says Roger, deeply grieved.

"Well, you hadn't said a word, you know," murmurs she, sorrowfully.

"How could I?" groans Dare. "When you were going of your own free will, and my folly, to marry another fellow."

"There was very little free will about it," whispers she, tearfully.

"Well, I'm sure I don't know what's going to be done now," says Mr. Dare, despairingly, sinking into a chair near the table, and letting his head fall in a distracting fashion into his hands.

He seems lost in thought, sunk in a very slough of despond, out of which it seems impossible to him he can ever be extricated. He has turned away his face, lest he shall see the little disconsolate figure in the other armchair, that looks so many degrees too large for it.

To gaze at Dulce is to bring on a state of feeling even more keenly miserable than the present one. She is looking particularly pretty to-night, her late encounter with Stephen, and her perplexity, and the anxiety about telling it all to Roger, having added a wistfulness to her expression that heightens every charm she possesses. She is dressed in a white gown of Indian muslin made high to the throat, but with short sleeves, and has in her hair a diamond star, that once belonged to her mother.

Her hands are folded in her lap, and she is gazing with a very troubled stare at the bright fire. Presently, as though the thoughts in which she has been indulging have proved too much for her, she flings up her head impatiently, and, rising softly, goes to the back of Roger's chair and leans over it.

"Roger," she says, in a little anxious whisper, that trembles ever so lightly, "you are not angry with me, are you?"

Impulsively, as she asks this, she raises one of her soft, naked arms and lays it round his neck. In every action of Dulce's there is something so childlike and loving, that it appeals straight to the heart. The touch of her cool, sweet flesh, as it brushes against his cheek, sends a strange thrill through Roger—a thrill hitherto unknown to him. He turns his face to hers; their eyes meet; and then, in a moment, he has risen, and he has her in his arms, and has laid his lips on hers, and they have given each other a long, long kiss, a kiss of youth and love!

"Angry—with you—my darling!" says Roger, at length,

in a low tone, when he has collected his scattered senses a little. He is gazing at her with the most infinite tenderness, and Dulce, with her head pressed close against his heart, feels with a keen sense of relief that she can defy Stephen, the world, cruel Fate, *all!* and that her dearest dream of happiness is at last fulfilled.

When they have asked each other innumerable questions about different matters that would concern the uninitiated world but little, but are fraught with the utmost importance to them, they grow happily silent; and, sitting hand in hand, look dreamily into the glowing embers of the fire. Trifles light as air rise before them, and strengthen them in the belief at which they have just arrived, that they have been devoted to each other for years. All the old hasty words and angry looks are now to be regarded as vague expressions of a love suppressed, because fearful of a disdainful reception.

Presently, after a rather prolonged pause, Dulce, drawing a deep but happy sigh, turns to him, and says, tenderly, though somewhat regretfully:

"Ah! if only you had not stolen those chocolate creams!"

"I didn't steal them," protested Roger, as indignantly as a man can whose arm is fondly clasped around the beloved of his heart.

"Well, of course, I mean if you hadn't *eaten* them," says Dulce, sadly.

"But, my life, I never *saw* them!" exclaims poor Roger, vehemently; "I swear I didn't."

"Well, then, if I hadn't *said* you did," says Dulce, mournfully.

"Ah! that indeed," says Mr. Dare, with corresponding gloom. "If you hadn't all might now be well; as it is— Do you know I have never since seen one of those loathsome sweets without feeling positively murderous, and shall hate chocolate to my dying day."

"It was a pity we fought about such a trifle," murmurs she, shaking her head.

"Was it?" Turning to her, he lifts her face with his hand and gazes intently into her eyes. Whatever he sees in those clear depths seem to satisfy him and make glad his heart. "After all, I don't believe it was," he says.

"Not a pity we quarreled, and—and lost each other?"

Considering the extremely close proximity to each other at this moment, the allusion to the loss they are supposed to have sustained is not very affecting.

"No. Though we were rather in a hole now," says Mr. Dare, rather at a loss for a word. "I am very *glad* we fought."

"Oh, Roger!"

"Aren't you?"

"How can you ask me such a heartless question?"

"Don't you see what it has done for us? Has it not taught us that"—very tenderly this—"we *love* each other?" His tone alone would have brought her round to view anything in his light. "And somehow," he goes on, after a necessary pause—"I mean," with an effort that speaks volumes for his sense of propriety, "Gower will give in, and absolve you from your promise. He may as well, you know, when he sees the game is up."

"But when will he see that?"

"He evidently saw it to-day."

"Well, he was very far from giving in to-day, or even dreaming of granting absolution."

"Well, we must make him see it even *more* clearly," says Roger, desperately.

"But how?" dejectedly.

"By making violent love to me all day long, and by letting me make it to you. It will wear him out," says Mr. Dare, confidently. "He won't be able to stand it. Would—would you much mind trying to make violent love to me?"

"Mind it?" says Dulce, enthusiastically, plainly determined to render herself up a willing (very willing) sacrifice upon the altar of the present necessity. "I should *like* it!"

This *naïve* speech brings Roger, *if possible*, a little closer to her.

"I think I must have been utterly without intellect in the old days, not to have seen then what a darling you are."

"Oh, no," says Dulce, meekly, which might mean that, in her opinion, either *he* is not without intellect, or she is not a darling.

"I was abominable to you then," persists Roger, with the deepest self-abasement. "I wonder you can look with patience at me now. I was a perfect bear to you!"

"*Indeed* you were not," says Dulce, slipping her arm round

his neck. "You couldn't have been, because I am sure I loved you even then; and besides," with a little soft, coaxing smile, "I won't listen to you at all if you call my own boy bad names."

Rapture; and a prolonged pause.

"What *shall* we do if that wretched beggar won't relent and let me marry you?" says Roger, presently.

"Only bear it, I suppose," with profoundest resignation; it is *so* profound that it strikes Mr. Dare as being philosophical, and displeases him accordingly.

"*You* don't seem to care much," he says, in an offended tone, getting up and standing with his back to the mantelpiece, and his face turned to her, as though determined to keep an eye on her.

"I don't care?" reproachfully.

"Not to any very great extent, I think; and of course it is not to be wondered at. I'm not much, I allow, and perhaps there are others—"

"Now that is not at all a pretty speech," interrupts Dulce, sweetly; "so you sha'n't finish it. Come here directly and give me a little kiss, and don't be cross."

This decides everything, He comes here directly, and gives her a little kiss, and isn't a bit cross.

"Why shouldn't you defy him and marry me?" says Roger, defiantly. "What right has he to extort such a promise from you? Once we were man and wife he would be powerless."

"But there is my word—I swore to him," returns she, earnestly. "I cannot forget that. It was an understanding, a bargain."

"Well, but," begins he again; and then he sees something in the little, pale, but determined face gazing pathetically up into his that deters him from further argument. She will be quite true to her word once pledged, he knows that; and though the knowledge is bitter to him, yet he respects her so highly for it, that he vows to himself he will no longer strive to tempt her from her sense of right. Lifting one of her hands, he lays it upon his lips, as though to keep himself by her dear touch from further speech.

"Never mind," he says, caressing her soft fingers tenderly. "We may be able to baffle him yet, and even if not, we can be happy together in spite of him. Can we not. I know *I*

can." Drawing her closer to him, he whispers gently,—

"'A smile of thine shall make my bliss!"

After a while it occurs to them that they ought to return to the drawing-room and the prosaic humdrumedness of everyday life. It is wonderful how paltry everytning has become in their sight, how it is dwarfed and stunted by comparison with the great light of love that is surrounding them. All outside this mist seems lost in a dull haze, seems pale, expressionless.

Opening the library-door with slow, reluctant fingers, they almost stumble against a figure crouching near the lintel. This figure starts into nervous life at their appearance, and, muttering something inaudible in a heavy indistinct tone, shuffles away from them, and is lost to sight round a corner of the corridor.

"Surely that was old Gregory," says Dulce, after a surprised pause.

"So it was," returns Roger, "and, *as* usual, as drunk as a fiddler."

"Isn't it dreadful of him?" says Dulce. "Do you know, Roger, his manner is so strange of late, that I verily believe that man is going mad."

"Well, he won't have far to go, at any rate," says Mr. Dare, cheerfully. "He has been on the road, I should say, a considerable time."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Let the dead past bury its dead."
—LONGFELLOW,

JUST at first it is so delightful to Dulce to have Roger making actual love to her, and so delightful to Roger to be able to make it, that they are content with their present and heedless of their future.

Not that everything goes quite smoothly with them, even now. Little skirmishes, as of old, arise between them, threatening to dim the brightness of their days. It was, indeed, only yesterday that a very serious rupture was near taking place, all occasioned by a difference of opinion about the respective merits of Mr. Morton's and Messrs. Crosse & Blackwell's pickles; Dulce declaring for the former, Roger for the latter.

Fortunately, Mark Gore coming into the room smoothed

matters over and drew conversation into a more congenial channel, or lamentable consequences might have ensued.

They hold to their theory about the certainty of Stephen's relenting in due time until they grow tired of it; and as the days creep on, and Gower sitting alone in his castle in sullen silence refuses to see or speak to them, or give any intimation of a desire to soften towards them, they lose heart altogether, and give themselves up a prey to despair.

Roger one morning had plucked up courage, and had gone over to the Fens, and had forced himself into the presence of its master and expostulated with him "mildly but firmly," as he assured Dulce afterwards, when she threw out broad hints to the effect that she believed he had lost his temper on the occasion. Certainly, from all accounts, a good deal of temper *had* been lost, and nothing indeed came of the interview beyond a select amount of vituperation from both sides, an openly avowed declaration on Mr. Gower's part that as he had not requested the pleasure of his society on this, or any other, occasion, he hoped it would be the last time Roger would present himself at the Fens; an equally honest avowal on the part of Mr. Dare to the effect that the discomfort he felt in coming was *almost* (it never could be *quite*) balanced by the joy he experienced at departing, and a few more hot words that very nearly led to bloodshed.

When Roger thought it all over dispassionately next morning, he told himself that now indeed all things were at an end, that no hope lay anywhere; and now February is upon them, and Spring begins to assert itself, and the land has learned to smile again, and all the pretty early buds are swelling in the hedgerows.

I wonder they don't get tired of swelling only to die in the long run. What does their perseverance gain for them? There is a little sunshine, a little warmth, the songs of a few birds flung across their trailing beauty, and then one heavy shower, and then—death! What a monotonous thing is nature, when all is told? Each year is but a long day; each life but a long year: at morn we rise, at night we lay our weary heads upon our pillows: at morn we rise again, and so on. As Winter comes our flowers fade and die; Spring brings them back again; again the Winter kills them, and so—forever!

Now Spring has come once more to the old Court, to commence its triumphant reign, regardless of the fact that no mat-

ter how bright its day may be while it lasts, still dissolution stares it in the face. The young grass is thrusting its head above ground, a few brave birds are singing on the barren branches. There is a stir, a strange vague flutter everywhere of freshly-opening life.

"We shall have to shake off dull sloth pretty early to-morrow," says Dicky Browne, suddenly, *apropos* of nothing that has gone before; his usual method of introducing a subject.

"Why?" asks Portia, almost startled. It is nearly five o'clock, and Mr. Browne, having sequestrated the remainder of the cake, the last piece being the occasion of a most undignified skirmish between him and the Boodie, the Boodie proving victor, is now at liberty to enter into light and cheerful conversation.

"The meet, you know," says Dicky. "Long way off. Hate hunting myself, when I've got to leave my bed for it."

"You needn't go," says Dulce; "nobody is pressing you."

"Oh! I'm not like *you*," says Mr. Browne, contemptuously, "liking a thing to-day and hating it to-morrow. You used to be a sort of modern—I mean—decent Diana, but lately you have rather shirked the whole thing."

"I had a cold last day, and—and a headache the day before that," stammers Dulce, blushing scarlet.

"Nobody could hunt with a headache," says Roger, at which defence Mr. Browne grins.

"Well, you've got *them* over," he says. "What's going to keep you at home to-morrow?"

"I don't understand you, Dicky," says Miss Blount, with dignity. "I am going hunting to-morrow; there is nothing that I know of likely to keep me at home."

She is true to her word. Next morning they find her ready equipped at a very early hour, "Taut and trim," as Dicky tells her, "from her hat to her boots."

"Do you know," he says, further, as though imparting to her some information hitherto undiscovered, "joking *apart*, you will understand, you are—*really*—quite a pretty young woman."

"Thank you, Dicky," says she, very meekly; and as a more substantial mark of her gratitude for this gracious speech, she drops a fourth lump of sugar into his coffee.

Shortly after this they start, Dulce still in the very gayest spirits, with Roger on her right hand and Mark Gore on her

left. But, as they near the happy hunting-grounds, her brightness flags; she grows silent and preoccupied, and each fresh hoof upon the road behind her makes her betray a desire to hide herself behind somebody.

Of late, indeed, hunting has lost its charm for her, and the meets have become a source of confusion and discomfort. Her zest for the chase has sustained a severe check, so great that her favorite hounds have solicited the usual biscuit from her hands in vain.

And all this is because the one thing dear to the soul of the gloomy Stephen is the pursuit of the wily fox, and that therefore on the field of battle it becomes inevitable that she must meet her whilom lover face to face.

Looking round fearfully now, she sees him at a little distance, seated on an irreproachable mount. His brows are knitted moodily, his very attitude is repellant. He responds to the pleasant salutations showered upon him from all quarters by a laconic "How d'ye do," or a still more freezing nod. Even Sir Christopher's hearty "Good-morning, lad," has no effect upon him.

"Something rotten in the state of Denmark, *there*," says the master, Sir Guy Chetwoode, turning to Dorian Branscombe. "Surely, eh? Rather a safe thing for that pretty girl of Blount's to have given him the go-by, eh?"

"Wouldn't have him at any price if *I* were a girl," says Branscombe. "I don't like his eyes. Murderous sort of beggar."

"Faith, I don't know," says Geoffrey Rodney, who is riding by them, and who is popularly supposed always to employ this expletive, because his wife is Irish. "I rather like the fellow myself; so does Mona. It's rough on him, you know, all the world knowing he has been jilted."

"I heard it was *he* gave *her* up," says Teddy Luttrel, who has been fighting so hard with a refractory collar up to this that he has not been able to edge in a word.

"Oh, I daresay!" says Branscombe, so ironically, that every one concludes it will be useless to say anything further.

And now the business of the day is begun. Every one has settled him or herself into the saddle and is preparing to make a day of it.

Two hours later many are in a position to acknowledge sadly that the day they have made has not been exactly up

to the mark. The various positions of these many are, for the most part, more remarkable than elegant. Some are reclining gracefully in a ditch; some are riding dolefully homeward with much more forehead than they started with in the morning; some, and these are the saddest of all, are standing forlorn in the middle of an empty meadow, gazing helplessly at the flying tail of the animal they bestrode only a short five minutes ago.

The field is growing decidedly thin. Lady Chetwoode, well to the front, is holding her own bravely. Sir Guy is out of sight, having just disappeared over the brow of the small hill opposite. Dicky Browne, who rides like a bird, is going at a rattling pace straight over anything and everything that comes in his way, with the most delightful impartiality, believing, as he has never yet come a very violent cropper, that the gods are on his side.

Roger and Dulce got a little way from the others, and are now riding side by side across a rather hilly field. Right before them rises a wall, small enough in itself, but in parts dangerous, because of the heavy fall the other side, hidden from the eye by some brambles growing on the top of the stone-work.

Lower down, this wall proves itself even more treacherous, hiding even more effectually the drop into the adjoining field, which is here too deep for any horse, however good, to take with safety. It is a spot well known by all the sportsmen in the neighborhood as one to be avoided, ever since Gort, the farmer, some years before, had jumped it for the sake of an idle bet, and had been carried home from it a dead man, leaving his good brown mare with a broken back behind him.

It would seem, however, that either ignorance or recklessness is carrying one of the riders to-day towards this fatal spot. He is now bearing down upon it with the evident intention of clearing the traitorous wall and so gaining upon the hounds, who are streaming up the hill beyond, unaware that almost certain destruction awaits him at the point towards which he is riding so carelessly.

Dulce, turning her head accidentally in his direction, is the first to see him.

"Oh, see there!" she cries, in a frightened tone, to Roger, pointing to the lower part of the field. "Who is that going to take Gort's Fall?"

Roger, following her glance, pulls up short, and stares fixedly at the man below, now drawing terribly near to the condemned spot. And, as he looks, his face changes, the blood forsakes it, and a horrified expression creeps into his eyes.

"By Jove! it is Stephen," he says at last, in an indescribable tone; and then, knowing he cannot reach him in time to prevent the coming catastrophe, he stands up in his stirrups and shouts to the unconscious Stephen, with all the strength of his fresh, young lungs, to turn back before it is too late.

But all in vain; Stephen either does not or cannot hear. He has by this time reached the wall; his horse, the gallant animal, responds to his touch. He rises—there is a crash, a dull thud, and then all is still.

Involuntarily Dulce has covered her eyes with her hand, and by a supreme effort has suppressed the cry that has risen from her heart. A sickening sensation of weakness is overpowering her. When at length she gains courage to open her eyes again she finds Roger has forsaken her, and is riding like one possessed across the open field, and—there beyond, where the sun is glinting in small patches upon the dry grass, she sees, too, a motionless mass of scarlet cloth, and a dark head lying—oh! so strangely quiet.

Roger having safely cleared the unlucky wall higher up, has flung himself from his saddle, and is now on his knees beside Gower, and has lifted his head upon his arm.

"Stephen, Stephen!" he cries, brokenly. But Stephen is beyond hearing. He is quite insensible, and deaf to the voice that in the old days used to have a special charm for him. Laying him gently down again, Roger rises to his feet, and looks wildly round. Dulce has arrived by this time, and, having sprung to her feet, has let her horse, too, go to the winds.

"He is not dead?" she asks at first, in a ghastly whisper, with pale and trembling lips.

"I don't know, I'm not sure," says Roger, distractedly "Oh, if somebody would *only* come!"

Not a soul is in sight. By this time every one has disappeared over the hill, and not a human being is to be seen far or near.

"Have you no brandy?" asks Dulce, who is rubbing the hands of the senseless man, trying to restore animation by this means.

"Yes, yes, I had forgotten," says Roger, and then he kneels down once again, and takes Stephen into his arms, and raising his head on his knee, tries to force a few drops of the brandy between his pallid lips.

At this supreme moment all is forgotten—all the old heart-aches, the cruel taunts, the angry words. Once again he is his earliest friend; the boy, the youth, the man, he had loved, until a woman had come between them. Everything rushes back upon him, as he stoops over Gower, and gazes, with passionate fear and grief, upon his marble face.

After all, there had been more good points than bad about Stephen, more good, indeed, than about most fellows. How fond he had been of him in the old days; how angry he would have been with any one who had dared then to accuse him of acting shabbily, or— Well, well, no use in raking up old grievances, now, and no doubt there was great temptation; and besides, too, uncivil things had been said to him, and he (Roger) had certainly not been up to the mark himself in many ways.

Memories of school and college life crowd upon Roger now, as he gazes with ever-increasing fear upon the rigid features below him; little scenes, insignificant in themselves, but enriched by honest sentiment, and tenderly connected with the dawn of manhood, when the fastidious Gower had been attracted and fascinated by the bolder and more reckless qualities of Dare, recur to him now with a clearness that, under the present miserable circumstances, is almost painful.

He tries to shake off those tormenting recollections, to bury his happy college life out of sight, only to find his mind once more busy on a fresh field.

Again he is at school, with Stephen near him, and all the glory of an Eton fight before him. What glorious old days they were! so full of life and vigor! and now, it is with exceeding pathos he calls to mind one memorable day on which he had banged Stephen most triumphantly about the head with a Latin grammar—Stephen's grammar, be it understood, which had always seemed to add an additional zest to the affair; and then the free fight afterwards, in which he, Roger, had been again victorious; and Stephen had not taken it badly either; had resented neither the Latin banging nor the victory later on. No, he was certainly not ill-tempered *then*,

dear old chap. Even before the blood had been wiped from their injured noses on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion Stephen had shaken hands with him, and they had sworn publicly a life-long friendship.

And here is the end of it! His sworn friend is lying stark and motionless in his embrace, with a deathly pallor on his face that is awfully like death, and with a heart, if it still beats, filled with angry thoughts of him, as he bends, scarcely less bloodless than himself, above him.

Will *no* one *ever* come?

Roger glares despairingly at Dulce, who is still trying to get some brandy down the wounded man's throat, and even as she does so Stephen's eyes unclose, and a heavy sobbing sigh escapes him.

Strangely enough, as the two bend over him, and his gaze wanders from one face to the other, it rests finally, with a great sense of content, not on Dulce's face but Roger's. Instinctively he turns in his hour of need from the woman who had wronged him to the man whom *he* had wronged in the first instance, and who—though he had suffered many things at his hands of late—brings to him now a breath from that earlier and happier life, where love—which has proved so bitter—was unknown.

"Stephen! Dear old fellow, you are not *much* hurt, are you?" asks Roger, tenderly. "Where is the pain? Where does it hurt you most?"

"Here!" says Stephen, faintly, trying to lift one of his arms to point to his left side; but, with a groan, the arm falls helpless, and then they know, with sickening feeling of horror, that it is broken. Stephen loses consciousness again for a moment.

"It is broken!" says Roger. "And I am afraid there must be some internal injury besides. What on earth is to be done, Dulce?" in a frantic tone; "we shall have him here all night unless we do something. Will you stay with him while I run and try to find somebody?"

But Stephen's senses having returned to him by this time, he overhears and understands the last sentence.

"No, don't leave me," he entreats, earnestly, though speaking with great difficulty. "Roger, are you there? Stay with me."

"There is Dulce," falters Roger.

"No, no; don't leave me here alone," says the wounded

man, with foolish persistency, and Roger, at his wits' end, hardly knows what to do.

"Are you anything easier now?" he asks, raising Stephen's head ever so gently. Dulce, feeling her presence has been thoroughly ignored, and fearing lest the very sight of her may irritate her late lover, draws back a little, and stands where he can no longer see her.

"Try to drink this," says Roger, holding the flask again to Gower's lips and forcing a few drops between them. They are of some use, as presently a slight, a very slight tinge of red comes into his cheek, and his eyes show more animation.

"It is very good of you, old man," he whispers, faintly, looking up at Roger. "I believe you are sorry for me, *after all*."

The "after all" is full of meaning.

"Why shouldn't I be sorry for you?" says Roger, huskily, his eyes full of tears. "Don't talk like that."

"I know you think I behaved badly to you," goes on Stephen, with painful slowness. "And perhaps I did."

"As to that," interrupted Roger, quickly, "we're quits there, you know; nothing need be said about that. Why can't we forget it? Come, Stephen, forget it all, and be friends again."

"With all my heart," says Gower, and his eyes grow glad, and a smile of real happiness illumines his features for a moment.

"Now, don't talk any more; don't, there's a good fellow," says Roger, with deep entreaty.

"There is—one thing—I must say," whispers Gower, "while I have time. Tell *her*—that I have behaved like a coward to her, and that I give her back her promise. Tell her she may marry whom she pleases." He gasps for breath, and then, pressing Roger's hand with his own uninjured one, says, with a last effort, "And that will be *you*, I hope."

The struggle to say this proves too much for his exhausted strength; his head drops back again upon Roger's arm, and, for the third time, he falls into a dead faint.

The tears are running down Roger's checks by this time, and he is gazing with ever-increasing terror at the deathly face below him, when looking up to address some remark to Dulce, he finds she is nowhere to be seen. Even as he looks round for her in consternation, he sees two or three men

hurrying toward him, and two others following more slowly with something that looks like a shutter or door between them. Dulce, while he was listening to Stephen's last heavily-uttered words, had hurried away, and, climbing over all that came in her way, had descended into a little valley not far from the scene of the accident, where at a farmhouse she had told her tale, and pressed into her service the men now coming quickly toward Roger.

With their help the wounded man (still happily unconscious) is carried to the farm-house, where he remains until, the carriage from the Court having arrived, they take him home in it as carefully as can be managed.

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In a few hours the worst is known; and, after all, the worst is not so very bad. His arm is broken and two of his ribs, and there is rather a severe contusion on his left shoulder. Little Dr. Bland has pledged them his word in the most solemn manner, however, that there is no internal injury, and that his patient only requires time and care to be quite himself again in *no time*.. This peculiar date is a favorite one with the little medico.

The household being reassured by this comfortable news, every one grows more tranquil, and dinner having proved a distinct failure, supper is proposed; and Roger having hunted the whole house unsuccessfully for Dulce, to compel her to come in and eat something, unearths her at last in the nursery, where she is sitting all alone, staring at the sleeping children.

"Where's nurse?" asks Roger, gazing around. "Has she been dismissed, and have you applied for the situation?"

"She has gone down for a message. I came here," says Dulce, "because I didn't want to speak to anybody. I feel so strange still, and so frightened."

"Come down and eat something," says Roger. "You *must*. I shall carry you if you won't walk, and think how the servants will speak about your light behavior afterwards! *Do* come, darling; you know you have eaten nothing since breakfast."

"I wonder if he is really in no danger?" says Dulce wistfully.

"He certainly is not. I have it from Bland himself; and, Dulce," and here he hesitates, as if uncertain whether he ought to proceed or not, "now it is all right, you know,

and—and that—and when we have heard he is on the safe road to recovery, it can't be any harm to say what is on my mind, can it?"

"No; I suppose not," says Dulce, blushing vividly.

"Well, then, just say you will marry me the very moment he is on his feet again," says Roger, getting this out with considerable rapidity. "It will seem ungracious of us, I think, not to take advantage of his kindness as soon as possible."

"Supposing he was *to go back of it all* when he got well," says Dulce, timidly.

"Oh, he *can't;* a promise is a promise, you know—as he has made us feel. Poor old Stephen!" this last hastily, lest he shall seem hard on his newly-recovered friend.

"If you think that," says Dulce, going close up to him and looking at him with soft love-lit eyes, I will marry you just whenever you like." To make this sweet assurance doubly sweet, she stands on tiptoe, and, slipping her arms round her lover's neck, kisses him with all her heart.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"About some act
That has no relish of salvation in't."
—*Hamlet.*

"Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge."
—*Titus Andronicus.*

"BEFORE you begin, Fabian, it is only fair to tell you that I will not listen favorably to one word in his defense. Under the farsical term of secretary, Slyme has been a disgrace and a torment to me for years; and last night has finished everything."

"It was very unfortunate, no doubt," says Fabian, regretfully. "What a curse the love of drink is!—a madness, a passion."

"I have told him he must go," says Sir Christopher, who is in a white heat of rage, and is walking up and down the room with an indignant frown upon his face. Just now, stopping short before Fabian, he drops into a seat, and says, testily, "*Unfortunate! that* is no word to use about it. Why, look you how it stands; you invite people to your house to dine, and on your way to your dining-room, with a lady on your arm, you are accosted and insolently addressed by one of your household—your secretary, forsooth—*so* drunk that it was shameful! He reeled! I give you my word, sir—he

reeled! I thought Lady Chetwoode would have fainted: she turned as pale as her gown, and but for her innate pluck would have cried aloud. It was insufferable, Fabian. Waste no more words over him, for go he shall."

"After all these years," says Fabian, thoughtfully, thrumming gently on the table near him with his forefinger.

All night long the storm has raged with unexampled fury, and even yet its anger is fierce and high as when first it hurled itself upon a sleeping world. The raindrops are pattering madly against the window-panes, through the barren branches of the elms the wind is shrieking, now rising far above the heads of the tallest trees, now descending to the very bosom of the earth, and, flying over it, drives before its mighty breath all such helpless things as are defenceless and at its mercy.

Perhaps the noise of this tempest outside drowns the keen sense of hearing in those within, because neither Fabian nor Sir Christopher stir, or appear at all conscious of the opening of a door at the upper end of the library, where they are sitting. It is a small door hidden by a portière leading into another corridor that connects itself with the servants' part of the house.

As this door is gently pushed open, a head protrudes itself cautiously into the room, though, on account of the hanging curtains, it is quite invisible to the other occupants of the apartment. A figure follows the head, and stands irresolutely on the threshhold, concealed from observation, not only by the curtain, but by a Japanese screen that is placed just behind Sir Christopher's head.

It is a crouching, forlorn, debased figure, out of which all manliness and fearlessness have gone. A figure crowned by gray hair, yet gaining no reverence thereby, but rather an additional touch of degradation. There is, too, an air of despondency and alarm about this figure to-day new to it. It looks already an outcast, a miserable waif, turned out to buffet with the angry winds of fortune at the very close of his life's journey. There is a wildness in his bloodshot eyes, and a nervous tremor in his bony hand, as it clutches at the curtain for support, that betrays the haunting terror that is desolating him.

"I don't care," says Sir Christopher, obdurately. "I have suffered too much at his hands; I owe him nothing but discomfort. I tell you my mind is made up, Fabian; he leaves me at once, and forever."

At this, the crouching figure in the doorway shivers, and shakes his wretched old head, as though all things for him are at an end. The storm seems to burst with redoubled fury, and flings itself against the panes, as though calling upon him to come out and be their pastime and their sport.

"My dear Sir Christopher," says Fabian, very quietly, yet with an air of decision that can be heard above the fury of the storm, "it is impossible you can turn the old man out *now*, at his age, to *again* solicit Fortune's favor. It would be terrible."

At this calm, but powerful intervention of Fabian's, the old head in the doorway (bowed with fear and anxiety) raises itself abruptly, as though unable to believe the words that have just fallen upon his ears. He has crept here to listen with a morbid longing to contemptuous words uttered of him by the lips that have just spoken; and lo! these very lips have been opened in his behalf, and naught but kindly words have issued from them.

As the truth breaks in upon his dulled brain that Fabian has actually been defending his—*his* case, a ghastly pallor overspreads his face, and it is with difficulty he suppresses a groan. He controls himself, however, and listens eagerly for what may follow.

"Do you mean to tell me I am bound to keep a depraved drunkard beneath my roof?" demands Sir Christopher, vehemently. "A fellow who insults my guests, who—"

"The fact that he has contracted this miserable habit of which you speak is only another reason why you should think *well* before you discard him now, in his old age," says Fabian, with increasing earnestness. "He will starve—die in a garret or by the wayside, if you fling him off. He is not in a fit state to seek another livelihood. Who would employ him? And you he has served faithfully for years—twenty years, I think; and of all the twenty only three or four have been untrustworthy. You should think of that, Christopher. He was your right hand for a long time, and—and he has done neither you nor yours a real injury."

Here the unhappy figure in the doorway raises his hand and beats his clenched fist in a half-frantic, though silent, manner against his forehead.

"You are bound, I think," says Fabian, in the same calm way, "to look after him, to bear with him a little."

"*You* defend him!" exclaims Sir Christopher, irritably, "yet I believe that in his soul he hates you—would do you a harm if he could. It is his treatment of *you* at times," says Sir Christopher, coming at last to the real germ of the danger he is cherishing against Slyme, "that—that— Remember what he said only last week about you."

"Tut!" says Fabian, "I remember nothing. He was drunk, no doubt, and said what he did not mean."

"I believe he did mean it. *In vino veritas.*"

"Well, even so; if he does believe in the story that has blasted my life, why"—with a sigh—"so do many others. I don't think the poor old fellow would really work me any mischief, but I doubt I have been harsh to him at times, have accused him somewhat roughly, I dare say, of his unfortunate failing; and for that, it may be, he owes me a grudge. Nothing more. His bark is worse than his bite. It is my opinion, Christopher, that underneath his sullen exterior there lurks a great deal of good."

The trembling figure in the doorway is growing more and more bowed. It seems now as if it would gladly sink into the earth through very shame. His hand has left the curtain and is now clinging to the lintel of the door, as though anxious of more support than the soft velvet of the portière could afford.

"Well, as you seem bent on supporting a most unworthy object," says Sir Christopher, "I shall pension Slyme, and send him adrift to drink himself to death as soon as suits him."

"Why do that?" says Fabian, as quietly as ever, but with all the determination that characterizes his every word and action. "This house is large, and can hide him somewhere. Besides, he is accustomed to it, and would probably feel lost elsewhere. He has been here for the third of a lifetime —a long, *long* time." (He sighs again. Is he bringing to mind the terrible length of the days that have made up the sum of the last five years of his life?) "Give him two rooms in the West wing, it is seldom used, and give him to understand he must remain there; but do not cast him out now that he is old and helpless."

At this last gentle mark of thoughtfulness on Fabian's part the figure in the doorway loses all self-control. With a stifled cry he flings his arms above his head, and staggers away in the corridor outside to his own den.

"What was that?" asks Sir Christopher, quickly; the smothered cry had reached his ears.

"What? I heard nothing," says Fabian, looking up.

"The storm, perhaps," says his uncle, absently. Then, after a pause, "Why do you so strongly espouse this man's cause, Fabian?"

"Because from my soul I pity him. He has had many things of late to try him. The death of his son a year ago, upon whom every thought of his heart was centered, was a terrible blow, and then this wretched passion for strong drink having first degraded, has, of course, finished by embittering his nature. I do not blame him. He has known much misfortune."

Sir Christopher, going up to him, places his hands upon the young man's shoulder and gazes earnestly, with love unutterable, in his eyes. His own are full of tears.

"No misfortune, however heavy, can embitter a *noble* nature," he says, gently. "One knows that when one knows *you*. For your sake, Fabian—because you ask it—Slyme shall remain."

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It grows towards evening, and still the rain descends in torrents. Small rivers are running on the gravel-walks outside, the snow-drops and crocuses are all dead or dying, crushed and broken by the cruel wind.

Down below in the bay the sea has risen, and with a roaring sound rushes inland to dash itself against the rocks. Now and then a flash of lightning illumines its turbulent breast and lets one see how the "ambitious ocean" can "swell, and rage, and foam, to be exalted with the threatening clouds." The sailors and boatmen generally, in the small village, are going anxiously to and fro, as though fearful of what such a night as this may produce.

Now a loud peal of thunder rattles overhead, rendering insignificant the wild howling of the wind that only a moment since had almost been deafening. And then the thunder dies away for a while, and the storm shrieks again, and the windows rattle, and the gaunt trees groan and sway, and the huge drops upon the window panes beating incessantly, make once more a "mournful music for the mind."

They are all assembled in Dulce's boudoir, being under the impression, perhaps, that while the present incivility of the

elements continues, it is cosier to be in a small room than a large one. It may be this, or the fact that both Dulce and Portia have declined to come down stairs or enter any other room, until dinner shall be announced, under any pretext whatever. And so as the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed has come to the mountain.

Sir Christopher has just gone through an exaggerated *resume* of old Slyme's disgraceful conduct last night, when the door is opened, and they all become aware that the hero of the story is standing before them.

Yes, there stands Gregory Slyme, pale, breathless, and with one hand already uplifted, as though to deprecate censure, and to stay the order to "begone," that he plainly expects from every lip.

"Why, he is here again!" cries Sir Christopher, now incensed beyond measure. "Even my niece's room is not safe from him."

He points angrily to the secretary, who cowers before his angry look, yet shows no intention of retiring. With all his air of hopeless sottishness, that clings to him like a spotted garment, there is still something strange about the man that attracts the attention of Mark Gore. He has been closely watching him ever since his entrance, and he can see that the head usually buried in the chest is now uplifted, that in the sunken eyes there is a new meaning, a fire freshly kindled, born of acute mental disturbance; and indeed in his whole bearing there is a settled *purpose* very foreign to it.

"Hear me, hear me!" he entreats, with quivering accents, but passionate haste. "Do not send me away *yet*, I *must* speak now—now, or never!"

The final word sinks almost out of hearing. His hands fall to his sides. Once again his head sinks to its old place upon his breast. Sir Christopher, believing him to be again under the influence of drink, opens his lips with the evident intention of ordering him from his presence, when Sir Mark interposes.

"He has come to say something. Let him say it," he says, tapping Sir Christopher's arm persuasively.

"Ay, let me," says Slyme, in a low tone, yet always with the remnant of a wasted passion in it. "It has lain heavy on my heart for years. I shall fling it from me now, if the effort to do it kills me."

Turning his bleared eyes right and left, he searches every

face slowly until he comes to Fabian. Here his examination comes to an end. Fastening his eyes on Fabian, he lets them rest there, and never again removes them during the entire interview. He almost seems to forget, or to be unaware, that there is any other soul in the room, save the man at whom he is gazing so steadfastly. It is to him alone he addresses himself.

"I call you to witness," he says, now striking himself upon his breast, "that whatever I have done has not gone unpunished. If my crime has been vile, my sufferings have been terrible. I have endured torments. I want no sympathy—none. I expect only detestation and revenge, but yet I would have you remember that there was a time when I was a man, not the soddened, brutish, contemptible *thing* I have become. I would ask you to call to mind all you have ever heard about remorse; its stings, its agony, its despair, and I would have you know that I have felt it all; yea, more, a thousand times more!"

All this time he has had his hand pressed against his chest in a rigid fashion. His lips have grown livid, his face pale as any corpse.

"This is mere raving," exclaims Sir Christopher, excitedly; but again Gore restrains him as he would have gone forward to order Slyme to retire.

"To-day," goes on Slyme, always with his heavy eyes on Fabian, "I heard you speak in my defence—*mine!* Sir, if you could only know how those words of yours burned into my heart, how they have burned since, how they are burning *now*," smiting himself, "you would be half avenged. I listened to you till my brain could bear no more. You spoke kindly of *me*, you had pity on my old age—upon *mine*, who had no pity on your youth, who ruthlessly ruined your life, who—"

"Man, if you have anything to confess—to explain—*say it!*" breaks in Sir Mark, vehemently, who is half mad with hope and expectancy.

Portia has risen from her low seat, and forgetful or regardless of comment, is gazing with large, white eyes at the old man. Sir Christopher has grasped Mark Gore's arm with almost painful force, and is trembling so violently that Gore places his other arm gently round him, and keeps it there as a support. All, more or less, are agitated. Fabian alone makes no movement; with a face white to the very lips, he

stands with his back against the mantel-piece, facing Slyme, so motionless that he might be a figure carved in marble.

Really deaf and blind to all except Fabian, the secretary takes no heed of Sir Mark's violent outburst. He has paused, indeed, at the interruption, some vague sense telling him he will not be heard while it continues, but now it has subsided he goes on again, addressing himself solely to Fabian, as though it had never occurred.

"It was for *him* I did it, for *his* sake," he says, monotonously. He is losing his head a little now, and his mind is wandering back to earlier days. "For my boy, my son—to save him. It was a sore temptation; and he never knew, he never knew." A gleam of something like comfort comes into his eyes as he says this.

"What *did* you do?" demands Dicky Browne, in an agony of hope and doubt. "Can't you say it at once and be done with it? Speak out, man—*do!*"

"Curse me! *Kill* me if you will!" cries Slyme, with sudden vehemence, stretching out his hands to Fabian, and still deaf to any voice but his. "You have been deceived, falsely accused, most treacherously dealt with. It was I forged that check—not you!"

The miserable man, as he makes this confession, falls upon his knees and covers his face with his hands.

A terrible cry bursts from Dulce; she springs to her feet, and would have rushed to Fabian but that Roger, catching her in his arms, prevents her. And indeed, it is no time to approach Fabian. He has wakened at last into life out of his curious calm, and the transition from his extreme quietude of a moment since to the state of ungovernable passion in which he now finds himself is as swift as it is dangerous.

"*You!*" he says, staring at the abject figure kneeling before him, in a tone so low as to be almost inaudible, yet with such an amount of condensed fury in it as terrifies the listeners. "*You!*" He makes a step forward as though he would verily fall upon his enemy and rend him in pieces, and so annihilate him from the face of the earth; but before he can touch him, a slight body throws itself between him and Slyme, and two small, white hands are laid upon his breast. These little hands, small and powerless as they are, yet have strength to force him backwards.

"Think," says Portia, in a painful whisper. "Think! Fabian, you would not harm that old man."

"My dear fellow, don't touch him," says Dicky Browne. "Don't. In your present frame of mind a gentle push of yours would be his death."

"Death!" says old Slyme, in such a strange voice that instinctively they all listen to him. "It has no terrors for me." He has raised his head from his hands, and is now gazing again at Fabian, as though fascinated, making a wretched and withal a piteous picture, as his thin white locks stream behind him. "What have I to live for?" he cries, miserably. "The boy I slaved for, sinned for, for whom I ruined you and my own soul, is dead, cold in his grave. Have pity on me, therefore, and send me where I may rejoin him."

Either the excitement of his confession, or the nervous dread of the result of it, has proved too much for him; because just as the last word passes his lips, he flings his arms wildly into the air, and, with a muffled cry, falls prone, a senseless mass, upon the ground.

When they lift him, they find clutched in his hand a written statement of all he has confessed so vaguely. They are very gentle in their treatment of him, but when he has recovered consciousness and has been carried by the servants to his own room, it must be acknowledged that they all breathe more freely.

Sir Christopher is crying like a child, and so is Dicky Browne. The tears are literally running in little rivulets all down Dicky's plump cheeks, but he is not in the least ashamed of them—as indeed, why should he be? As in between his sobs he insists on telling everybody he is so glad—so awfully glad, his apparent grief, had they been in the mood for it, would have struck them all as being extremely comic.

The effect of their tears upon the women has the most desirable result. It first surprises, and then soothes them inexpressibly. It leaves indeed a new field entirely open to them. Instead of being petted, they can pet.

Julia instantly undertakes Dicky, who doesn't quite like it; Dulce appropriates Sir Christopher, who likes it very much.

Fabian, now that his one burst of passion is at an end, is again strangely silent. Mark Gore, laying his hand upon his shoulder, says something to him in a low tone unheard by the rest, who are all talking together and so making a solitude for these two.

"It is too late," says Fabian, replying to him slowly; "too late." There is more of settled conviction than of bitterness

in his tone, which only renders it the more melancholy. "He was right. He has ruined my life. Were I to live twice the allotted time given to man, I should never forget these last five horrible years. They have killed me; that is, the best of me. I tell you, deliverance has come *too late!*"

Even as his voice dies away another rises.

"Do not say that—*anything* but that," entreats Portia, in deep agitation. Once more this evening she lays her small, jeweled hand upon his breast and looks into his eyes. "Fabian, there is renewed hope, a fresh life before you; take courage. Remember—Oh, Mark, *speak* to him!"

She is trembling violently, and her breath is coming with suspicious difficulty. Her lips are quivering, and pain, actual physical pain, dimming the lustre of her violet eyes. The old ache is tugging angrily at her heart-strings now.

Still Fabian does not relent. As yet the very salve that has cured his hurt has only made the hurt more unendurable by dragging it into public notice. Now that he is free, emancipated from the shadow of this crime that has encompassed him as a cloud for so long, its proportions seem to grow and increase until they reach a monstrous size. To have been wounded in the body, or deprived of all one's earthly goods at a stroke, or bereaved of one's nearest and dearest, would all have been sore trials no doubt. But, alas! to make him a fixed figure for scorn to point his slow, unmoving finger at. What agony, with misfortune, could cope with that?

And she, who had not trusted him when she *might*, will he care that she should trust him now when she *must?*

Slowly he lifts the pale, slender hand, and very gently lets it fall by her side. His meaning is not to be misunderstood; he will none of her. Henceforth their paths shall lie as widely apart as they have lain (of *her own* choice) for the past few months.

"I repeat it," he says, quietly, letting his eyes rest for a moment upon hers, "it is *too late!*"

And outside the wild winds, flying past with an even fiercer outbreak of wrath, seem to echo those fatal words, "Too late!" The very rain, being full of them, seeks to dash them against the window panes. A sudden roar of thunder resounding overhead comes as a fit adjunct to the despair embodied in them. All nature is awake, and the air seems full of its death-knells.

Portia, sick at heart, moves silently away.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now."
—*Julius Cæsar.*

"Eyes, look your last;
Arms, take your last embrace!"
—*Romeo and Juliet.*

THE night closes in, the rain has ceased, or only now and then declares itself in fitful bursts, but still the wind rages and the storm beats upon land and sea, as though half its fury is not yet expended. The clouds are scudding hurriedly toward the West, and now and then, as they separate, one catches a glimpse of a pale, dying moon trying to shine in the dark vaults above, her sickly gleam only rendering more terrible the aspect of the land below.

Still the lightning comes and goes, and the thunder kills the sacred calm of night; Dulce and Julia, standing in the window, gaze fearfully towards the angry heavens, and speak to each other in whispers. Portia, who is sitting in an arm-chair, with her colorless face uplifted and her head thrown back, is quite silent, waiting with a kind of morbid longing for each returning flash. The very children are subdued, and, lying in a pretty group upon the hearth-rug, forget to laugh or play, or do anything save cry aloud, "Ah! wasn't *that* a big one?" when the lightning comes, or, "That was the loudest one yet," when the deafening thunder rolls.

The men are standing in another window, talking in low tones of Fabian's exculpation, when Fabian himself comes in, eagerly, excitedly, and so unlike the Fabian of old that Portia gazes at him in silent wonder.

"There's a ship in sore trouble down there," he says, pointing as though he can see the sea down below, where now the angry surf is rolling in, mountains high, hoarsely roaring as it comes. "Brown from the coast-guard station has just run up to tell us of it. They are about to man the life-boat; who will come down to the beach with me?"

They have all come forward by this time, and now the men, going eagerly to seize on any coats and hats nearest to them, make themselves ready to go down and render any assistance that may be required of them. The station is but a little one, the coast-guards few, and of late a sort of intermittent fever has laid many of the fishermen low, so that their help may, for all they yet can know, be sorely needed.

Fabian, who has been delayed in many ways, is almost the

last to leave the house. Hurrying now to the doorway, he is stopped by a slight figure, that coming up to him in the gloom of the night, that rushes in upon him from the opened hall-door, seems like some spirit of the storm.

It is Portia. Her face is very white, her lips are trembling, but her eyes are full of a strange, feverish fire.

"May I go, too? Do not prevent me," she says, in an agitated tone, laying her hand upon his arm. "I *must* go. I cannot stay here alone; thinking, thinking."

"You!" interrupts he; "and on such a night as this! Certainly not. Go back to the drawing-room at once." Involuntarily he puts out his hand across the doorway, as though to bar her egress. Then suddenly recollection forces itself upon him, he drops his extended arm, and coldly averts his eyes from hers.

"I beg your pardon," he says; "Why should I dictate to you? You will do as you please, of course; by what right do I advise or forbid you?"

Oppressed by the harshness of his manner and his determined coldness, that amounts almost to dislike, Portia makes no reply. When first he spoke, his words, though unloving, had still been full of a rough regard for her well-being, but his sudden change to the indifferent tone of an utter stranger had struck cold upon her heart. Cast down and disheartened, she now shrinks a little to one side, and by a faint gesture of the hand motions him to the open door.

As though unconscious, or cruelly careless of the wound he has inflicted, Fabian turns away from her and goes out into the sullen, stormy night, and, reaching the side-path that leads direct through the wood to the shore, is soon lost to sight.

Upon the beach dark forms are hurrying to and fro. Now and then can be heard the sound of a distant signal-gun; small knots of fishermen are congregated together, and can be seen talking anxiously when the lurid lightning, flashing overhead, breaks in upon the darkness.

There is terrible confusion everywhere. Hurried exclamations and shrill cries of fear and pity rise above the angry moaning of the wind, as now and then a faint lull comes in the storm; then, too, can be heard the bitter sobs and lamentations of two women, who are clinging to their men, as though by their weak arms they would hold them from battling with the waves to-night.

The sea is dashing itself in wildest fury against rock and boulder, and rushing in headlong up from the sands only to recede again in haste, as though in a hurry to fly back again to swell the power of the cruel waves that would willingly deal out death with every stroke.

The clouds, having changed from black to murky yellow are hanging heavily in mid-air, as though undecided as to whether they will not fall in a body and so overwhelm the trembling earth. The spray, dashed inland by the terrific force of the wind, lighting on the lips of those who stand with straining eyes looking seaward, fills their mouths with its saltness, and blinds their aching sight.

All the people from the little village are on the shore, and are talking and gesticulating violently. Some of them have fathers, brothers, and, perhaps, "nearer and dearer ones still than all others," on the point of incurring deathly danger to-night. Some of them are standing, with clinched hands and stony eyes, watching as though fascinated by the cruel, crawling sea, as it runs up to their feet, gaily, boisterously, heedless of the unutterable misery in their pallid faces. But for the most part, people are full of energy, and are shouting from one to the other, and examining ropes or asking eager questions of grizzled old sailors, who, with plug in cheek and stoical features, are staring at the sea.

"Where is the ship?" asks Dicky Browne, laying his hand on the arm of one of those ancient mariners to steady himself, while the old salt, who is nearly thrice his age, stands steady as a rock.

"Close by; a schooner from some furrin' port, with wine, they say." So shouts the old man back again.

"And the life-boat?"

"Is manned an' away. 'Twill be a tussle to-night, sir; no boat can live in such a sea, I'm thinking. Hark to the roar of it."

The dull moon, forcing itself through the hanging clouds, casts at this moment a pallid gleam upon the turbid ocean, making the terrors of the hour only more terrible. Now at last they can see the doomed vessel; the incessant dashing of the waves is slowly tearing it in pieces; some figure with flowing hair can be seen near one of the dismantled masts. Is it a woman? and what is that she holds aloft?—a child! a little child!

The agony increases. Some run along the beach in frantic

impotency, calling upon heaven to show pity now, in tones that even pierce the ghastly howling of the wind. Anon, the quivering lightning comes again, shedding a blue radiance over all.

Twice has the life-boat been repulsed and beaten back, in spite of the strenuous efforts of its gallant crew. The second time a cry goes up that strikes dismay to the hearts of those around, as a man is laid upon the damp beach, who had gone forth full of courage with his fellows, but now lies stiffening into the marble calm of death.

Dulce, who has run down to the strand without a word to any one, and who is now standing a little apart with Roger's arm round her, hearing this unearthly cry, covers her face with her hands and shivers violently in every limb. The darting lightning has shown her the ghastly outline of the poor, brave figure on the sand, now hushed in its last sleep.

At this moment, Portia, creeping up to where they are standing, with hands uplifted to her forehead, tries to pierce the gloom. The spray from a projecting rock being flung back upon them, drenches them thoroughly. Roger, putting out his hand hurriedly, draws Dulce out of its reach, and would have persuaded Portia to come to a more sheltered spot, but she resists his entreaty, and, waving him from her impatiently, still continues her eye-search for something that she evidently supposes to be upon the beach. Where she is standing, a shadow from a huge rock so covers her that she is invisible to any comer.

Now some one is advancing towards them through the darkness and clinging mist. Dulce, who is sitting on the ground and weeping bitterly, does not see him, but Roger goes quickly toward him. It is Fabian, pale, but quite composed, and with a certain high resolve in his dark eyes. There is, indeed, in this settled resolve something that might be almost termed gladness.

"Ah! it is you," he says, hurriedly beckoning to Roger to come farther away from Dulce, which sign Roger obeying brings both him and Fabian a degree nearer to Portia. Yet, standing motionless as she does within the gloom, they neither see her nor feel her presence.

"Here, catch my watch," says Fabian, quickly, in a business-like tone; "and," with a short laugh, "keep it if I don't get back." He flings him the watch as he speaks.

"Where are you going?" asks Roger, breathlessly, "where?"

"With those fellows in the life-boat. They want another hand now poor Jenkins has been bowled over, and I shall go; they are losing heart, but my going with them will change all that. Tell Dulce—"

"You *shall* not go!" cries Roger, frantically. "It is throwing away your life. There are those whose lives can be better spared; let *them* go. Let *me* go. Fabian, think of that old man at home."

"My dear fellow, don't bury me in such a hurry," says Fabian, lightly. "These poor fellows below have wives and families depending on them, and no one implores them not to go. I will take my chance with them. Now listen—"

"But not alone!" says Roger; "you shall not go alone. I will go with you. To venture in such a sea—but, of course, that should not be considered. Well, come then, come!" The poor boy, in spite of himself, does consider it, but bravely pushes forward in the vague thought that if he goes he may be of use to his friend, his brother.

"Impossible!" says Fabian. "There is not room for another. If we come back again unsuccessful, I promise you, you shall try your chance then. Here, don't look so gloomy, but hold my coat, and keep it dry, as I daresay I shall be chilly enough when I get back to you."

He speaks with the utmost cheerfulness, indeed with a subdued gayety that might emanate from a quiet man just starting on a pleasurable expedition.

"Do you know the danger?" says Roger, in a broken voice, clinging to his hand, but feeling that all remonstrance will be in vain.

"Tut! why should there be more danger for me than for another? Now go back to her—she is there, is she not? my *dear* little Dulce. Tell her from me— No!—tell her nothing. Good-by, old man; wish me a safe return till I come; and—and—be good to her—always love her—"

He turns abruptly aside, and, springing down from the rock where he has been standing, finds himself again on the beach. He is hurrying once more toward the boat, which having sustained some slight injuries in its last attempt is not quite seaworthy, but requires some looking after by the men before they can start afresh, when he is stopped by the pressure of two soft hands upon his arm.

Turning, he looks into Portia's eyes. She is haggard, ghastly in her pallor, but unspeakably beautiful. Her fair

hair, having come undone, is waving lightly in the tempestuous wind. Her lips are parted.

"You are not going *out there?*" she says, pointing with a shudder to the tumultuous waves, and speaking in a tone so full of agony and reckless misery that it chills him. "You *shall* not! Do you hear? Fabian! Fabian! listen to me."

It is so dark and wild that no one can see her; no ears but his can hear; She flings herself in a passion of despair upon her knees before him, and encircles him with her arms.

"My darling! My best beloved, stay with me!" she cries, wildly. "Hate me—spurn me—live—*live!* that sea will tear you from me—it will kill—"

Stooping over her, with a very gentle movement, but with determination, he unclasps her clinging arms and raises her to her feet.

"You must not kneel there on the wet sand," he says, quietly; "and forgive me if I remind you of it, but you will not care to remember all this to-morrow."

"I shall not remember it to-morrow," replies she, in a strange, dreamy tone, her hands falling nerveless at her sides. She does not seek to touch or persuade him again, only gazes earnestly up at him, through the wretched mist that enshrouds them, with a face that is as the faces of the dead.

Upon his arm is a shawl one of the women below (he is very dearly beloved in the village) had forced upon him an hour ago. He is bringing it back now to return it to her before starting, but, a thought striking him, he unfolds it, and crosses it over Portia's bosom.

"One of the women down there lent it to me," he says, coldly still, but kindly. "Return it to her when you can."

With a little passionate gesture she flings it from her, letting it lie on the ground at her feet.

"It is too late—the coldness of death is upon me," she says, vehemently. Then in an altered tone, calmed by despair, she whispers, slowly, "Fabian, if you *will* die—forgive me first?"

"If there is anything to forgive, I have done so long ago. But there is nothing."

"Is there nothing in the thought that I love you, either? Has not this knowledge power to drag you back from the grave?"

"'Too late for the balm when the heart is broke,'"

quotes he, sadly.

"And yet you loved me once," she says, quickly.

"I love you now as I never loved you," returns he, with sudden, eager passion. Her arms are round his neck, her head is thrown back, her lovely eyes, almost terrible now in their intensity, are gazing into his. Instinctively his arms close around her—he bends forward.

A shout from the beach! The boat is launched, and they only await him to go upon their perilous journey. When death is near, small things of earth grow even less.

"They call me! All is over now between us," he murmurs, straining her to his heart. Then he puts her a little away from him—still holding her—and looks once more into her large, tearless eyes. "If life on earth is done," he says, solemnly, "then in heaven, my soul, we meet again!"

He lays his lips on hers.

"In heaven, my love, and soon!" returns she, very quietly, and so they part!

* * * * * * * * *

It is but a little half-hour afterwards when they bring him back again, and lay him gently and in silence upon the wet sand—cold and dead! Some spar had struck him, they hardly know what, and had left him as they brought him home.

Many voices are uplifted at this sad return, but all grow hushed and quiet as a girl with bare head presses her way resolutely through the crowd, and, moving aside those who would mercifully have delayed her, having reached her dead, sits down upon the sand beside him, and, lifting his head in her arms, dank and dripping with sea-foam, lays it tenderly upon her knees. Stooping over it, she presses it lovingly against her breast, and with tender fingers smooths back from the pale forehead the short, wet masses of his dark hair. She is quite calm, her fingers do not even tremble, but there is a strange, strange look in her great eyes.

His eyes are closed. No ugly stain of blood mars the beauty of his face. He lies calm and placid in her embrace, as though wrapt in softest slumber—but oh! how irresponsive to the touch that once would have thrilled his every sense with rapture!

There is something so awful in the muteness of her despair, that a curious hush falls upon those grouped around her—and him. The whole scene is so fraught with a weird horror, that when one woman in the background bursts into bitter weeping, she is pushed out of sight, as though emotion of a demon-

strative nature is out of place just here. Noisy grief can have no part in this hopeless sorrow.

Dicky Browne, bending over her (Roger has taken Dulce home), says:

"Oh, Portia! that it should end like this, and just now—*now*, when life had opened out afresh for him!" His voice is choked and almost inaudible. Now that he is gone, they all know how dear he has been to them, how interwoven with theirs has been his quiet melancholy life.

"I knew it," says Portia, not quickly, but yet with some faint, soft vehemence. "I am not surprised, I am not grieved." She whispers something else after this repeatedly, and Dicky, bending lower, hears the words, "And soon—and soon." She repeats them in an ecstatic undertone; there is joy and an odd *certainty* in it. They are the last words she ever spoke to *him*.

"He is very cold," she says then, with a little shiver.

Sir Mark, seeing the tears are running down Dicky's cheeks and that he is incapable of saying anything further, pushes him gently to one side, and murmurs something in Portia's ear. She seems quite willing to do anything they may desire.

"Yes, yes. He must come home. It will be better. I will come home with him." And then with a long-drawn sigh, "Poor Uncle Christopher!" This is the last time her thoughts ever wander away from her dead love. "It will be well to take him away from the cruel sea," she says, lifting her eyes to the rough but kindly faces of the boatmen who surround her. "But," piteously, "oh! do not *hurt* him!"

"Never fear, missy," says one old sailor, in a broken voice; and a young fellow, turning aside, whispers to a comrade that he was "her man" in tones of heartfelt pity.

Still keeping his head within her arms, she rises slowly to her knees, and then the men, careful to humor her, so lift the body that she—even when she has gained her feet—has still this dear burden in her keeping. At the very last, when they have laid him upon the rude bier they have constructed for him in a hurry, she still hesitates, and regards with anguish the hard spot where she must lay her burden down.

She gazes distressfully around her, and then plucks with a little mournful, helpless fashion at a dainty, fleecy thing that lies close to her throat, and is her only covering from the angry blast. One of the women divining her purpose, presses forward, and, in silence, folds her own woollen shawl and lays

it on the bier, and then unfastening the white Shetland fabric round Portia's neck, lays that upon her own offering, so that the dead man's cheek will rest on it. Her womanly soul has grasped the truth, that the girl wants his resting-place to be made softer by some gift of hers; and when her task is completed, and the men, gathering up their load, silently prepare to move with it towards the old Court, Portia turns upon this woman a smile so sweet, so full of gratitude, that she breaks into bitter weeping, and, flinging her apron over her honest, kindly, sunburnt face, runs hurriedly away.

"She was his lass. Poor soul! poor soul!" says another woman in a hushed tone, and with deep pathos.

Holding his dead hand in hers, Portia, with steady steps, walks beside the rough bier, and so the sad procession winds its solemn way up to the old Court, with Sir Mark at its head and Dicky Browne at his feet, and Portia, with bare uplifted head and wrapt eyes. still clinging fondly to the poor clay, so well beloved by all.

Silently, with breaking hearts, they carry him into the grand old hall, and lay him reverently upon the marble flooring. Silently, they gaze upon his unmarred beauty. Not a sound—not a sob—disturbs the sacred stillness. Portia, always with his hand in hers, falls upon her knees, and, pressing it against her breast, raises her eyes devoutly heavenward. One by one, they all withdraw—Sir Mark, to break the terrible news to the old man. She is alone with her dead! With a little sigh she crouches close to him, and lays her cheek against his. The icy contact conveys no terror to her mind. She does not shrink from him, but softly, tenderly, caresses him from time to time, and yet he moves not, nor wakens into life beneath her gentle touch. Truly,

"After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well."

CHAPTER XXIX.

"'Whom the gods love die young,' was said of yore."
—Don Juan.

"Death came with friendly care."
—Coleridge.

It all happened only yesterday, yet how long ago it seems already; and now the sun is shining again, bravely, cheerily, as though life is all made up of joy and gladness, and as though storms that despoil the earth, and heavier storms that wreck the soul, are miseries unknown; and yet he is dead, and she—

In silence they had carried him to his own chamber, and had laid him on his bed, she going with him always with his clay-cold hand in hers, and never a moan from her pale lips.

The storm had gone down by that, and a strange mournful stillness, terrible after the late rioting of the elements, covered all the land. The silence might be felt, and through it they listened eagerly for her sighs, and hoped for the tears that should have come to ease her stricken heart, but all in vain; and watching her they knew at last that the springs of grief within her were frozen, and that the blessed healing waters that can cool the burning fever of despair were not to flow for her. Only a certain curious calm lay on her, killing all outward demonstrations of grief. She spoke to no one, she was hardly, perhaps, at times, aware of the presence of those around her. Dulce's sobs did not rouse her. She showed no symptom of emotion when Sir Christopher bent his white head in inexplicable woe over the form of the man who had been dear to him as his own soul. As she knelt beside the corpse, she moved now and then, and her breath came and went softly, regularly, but her eyes never departed from the face before her, with its closed eyes and sad, solemn smile. Perhaps, in her strange musings, she was trying to follow him in spirit to where he had

> "Gone before,
> To that unknown and silent shore"

so dimly dreamt of here, because her eyes are gleaming large and clear, and almost unearthly in their brilliance.

At first, though somewhat in awe of her, they had sought by tenderest means to draw her from the room. But she had resisted, or rather been utterly deaf to all entreaties, and, kneeling by the bed that held all that she had loved or ever could love, still fed her eager gaze with sight of him, and pressed from time to time his ice-cold hand to her cheeks, her lips, her eyes.

Then Sir Mark had admonished them to let her be, and sinking into a chair, with a heavy sigh, had kept her vigil with her. Tall candles gleamed on distant tables. The night wind sighed without; footsteps came and went, and heart-broken sighs and ill-suppressed sobs disturbed the air. The little child he had loved—the poor Boodie—would not be forbidden, and, creeping into the sad room, had stolen to the bedside, and had laid upon his breast a little pallid blossom she had, secretly and alone, braved all the terrors of the dark night to

gain, having traversed the quiet garden to pluck it from the tiny plot out there she called her own.

She had not been frightened when she saw him, but had stood gazing in some wonder at the indescribably pathetic smile that glorified his lips, after which she had given her hand obediently to Dicky Browne, and had gone back with him to her nursery, content, and far less sad than when she came.

Sometimes they all came and gazed on him together; Julia trembling, but subdued; Dulce with her hand in Roger's; the old man inconsolable. Now Dicky Browne whispers feeble but well-meant words of comfort to him, now Sir Mark touches his arm in silent sympathy. But they all keep somewhat apart from Portia; she has grown suddenly sacred in their eyes, as one to whom the beloved dead more especially belongs.

One of them, Sir Mark, I believe, seeing a little bit of dark-hued ribbon round his neck, bent forward, and, loosening it, draws to light a flat gold locket with the initials P. V. sunk deeply in it. His hand shook at this discovery; he hesitated; then, some fine instinct revealing to him that it might contain some hidden charm strong enough to rouse her from her unnatural calm, he touched Portia's shoulder and laid the locket in her hand.

Mechanically she opened it, yet testily too, as if unwilling or unable to keep her eyes for even the shortest space of time from the lifeless face so dear to her. But, once opened, her glance riveted itself upon its contents. Her own face looked up at her, her own eyes smiled at her. It was her portrait that she saw, painted by him, no doubt, sadly and in secret, and worn against his heart ever since.

Long she gazed at it. Her whole face changed. The terrible calm has broken up, but no grief came in its place. There was only joy unutterable and a rapture most blessed and divine.

"My love, I knew it without this," she said, softly. Her eyes once more returned to him; a quick but lengthened sigh escaped her; her head fell forward on his breast.

They waited. The minutes grew, but still she never stirred. Some one, whispering comfort to her, tried to raise her head, but comfort from heaven itself had reached her. She was *with him!* She was quite dead!

They said some tissue in her heart had given way, and perhaps it was so, but surely grief had severed it.

THE END.

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